



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07604684 0

THE FIRST STEP



ELIZA ORNE WHITE

1. Section, 1st and 2nd, 1000.

D

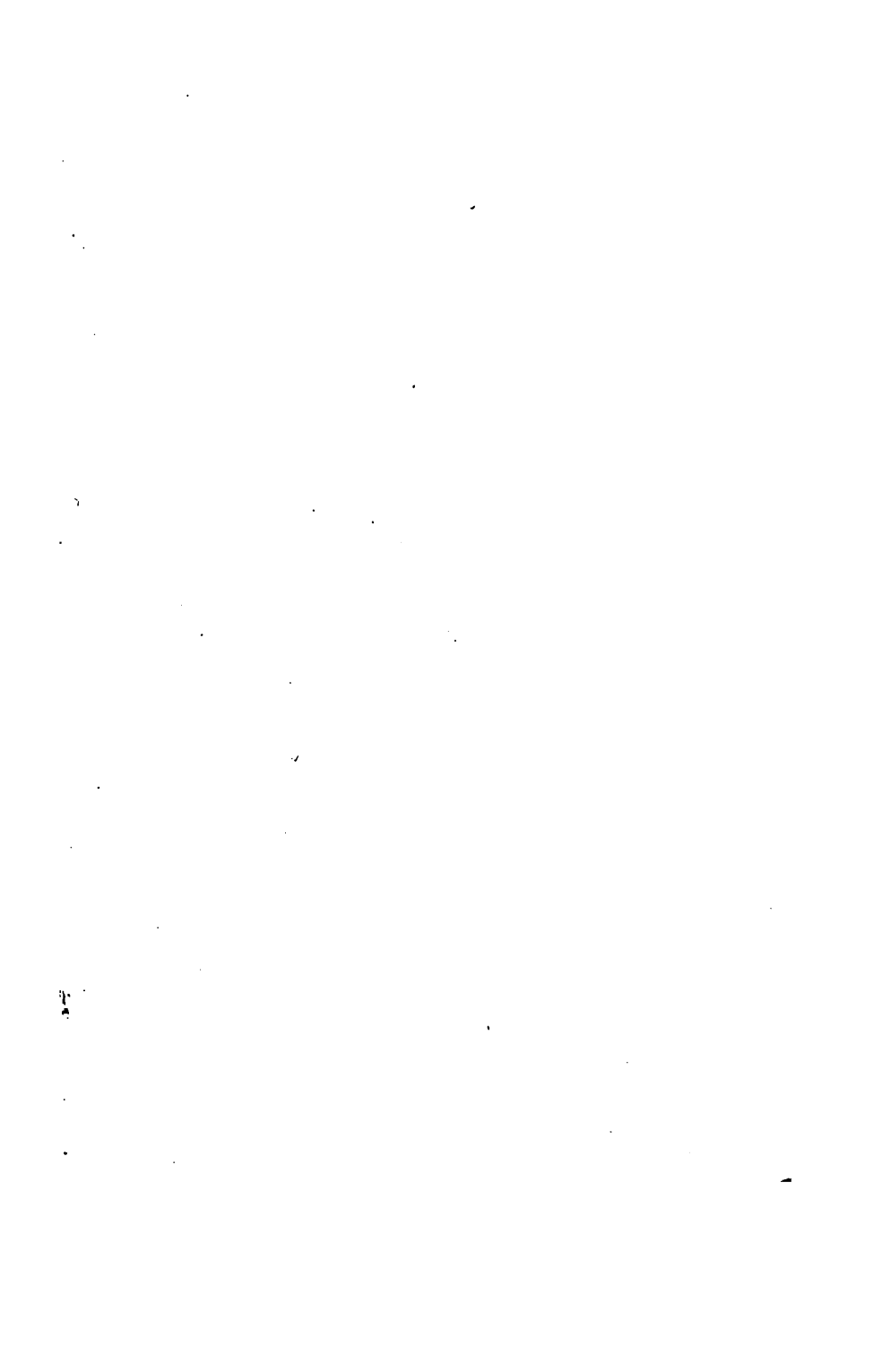
1000

W. H. H.

1. *Leptocarpus* *leptocarpus*.



White



By Eliza Orne White

NOVELS

THE FIRST STEP.
THE WARES OF EDGEFIELD.
JOHN FORSYTH'S AUNTS.
LESLEY CHILTON.
WINTERBOROUGH.
THE COMING OF THEODORA.
MISS BROOKS.
A LOVER OF TRUTH.
A BROWNING COURTSHIP, AND OTHER STORIES.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

THE ENCHANTED MOUNTAIN.
BROTHERS IN FUR.
A BORROWED SISTER.
AN ONLY CHILD.
WHEN MOLLY WAS SIX.
A LITTLE GIRL OF LONG AGO.
EDNAH AND HER BROTHERS.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

The First Step

The First Step

A NOVEL

By

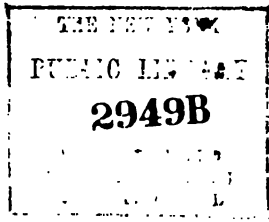
Eliza Orne White



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

1892

1892



COPYRIGHT, 1914, BY ELIZA ORNE WHITE

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Published March 1914

TO ALL THOSE
WHO HAVE TAKEN "THE FIRST STEP"
TOWARDS MAKING AN OLD HOUSE AS GOOD AS NEW
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
WITH SYMPATHY AND APPRECIATION

98 FEB 1936

1917-18-19

1005

The First Step

comes from absolute confidence in one's self: and so it has been a surprise to me in coming back here after fourteen years to find that Maria's face is full of lines of discontent. Why should she be discontented, when she is so self-satisfied? I should not be surprised if she sometimes seemed sad, although it is many years since her husband died, but discontent has always seemed to me the mark of a shallow nature, and whatever Maria's faults are, she certainly is not shallow.

"Isabel, are you never going to get a new handle for the secretary?" said Maria.

"Give me time," I murmured. "It is n't quite three weeks since I got settled, and at first I thought the missing handle would turn up."

Cornelia, meanwhile, had taken the arm-chair with that sureness of aim which marks all Cornelia's actions where her own comfort is concerned. She sank into it with a somewhat sulky expression. Cornelia can chatter like a magpie when we are alone together, but to-night her mother had evidently taken her away from some expected counter-attraction at home.

The First Step

The well-rounded lines of her young figure, in a white frock, combined with the soft color in her cheeks and the warm brown of her hair and eyes to make a picture that delighted the eye. If only Cornelia might have equally pleased the mind! Cornelia looked distinctly bored. To be bored at seventeen is an unpardonable crime.

"Sing something for Miss Isabel," said Maria, glancing at the old-fashioned square piano.

Cornelia, who was trained to obedience, rose half unwillingly and crossed the room. She has a rich, contralto voice that surprises me every time I hear it.

"You ought to have the piano tuned," said Maria. "Sam Jenks is the best tuner. Shall I send him around to-morrow?"

Maria has been the greatest possible help to me in getting settled, but it was only by using the most superhuman tact that I could make her allow me the small satisfaction of arranging my furniture as I pleased. The worm will turn at last.

I do not know from which of my ancestors I have inherited the spirit of contradiction that

The First Step

always makes me wish to go against Maria's advice. I felt at the moment that I would rather have my piano send forth its discordant notes all summer than have it tuned at all, and that if, by any stress of circumstances, I came to feel it must be done, on no account would I employ Sam Jenks. And yet I realized that the fault was mine, not Maria's, whose advice heretofore had been excellent. It was because I recognized my own limitations that I said meekly, "Thank you, I shall be much obliged if you will send him here to-morrow."

Thus encouraged Maria added, "There is one thing more I have been meaning to speak of, Isabel, and that is the first step as you come up to the front door. It is very shaky and you may have a serious accident any time. There are three good carpenters in town, but Emmons is the best man for you."

"Why for me?" I asked.

"Because he is strictly honest and won't impose on you. You are so soft, Isabel, that you need some one who will look after your interests. Emmons is the only carpenter in town who employs union men. This makes him a little

The First Step

more expensive than the others, but his work is sure to be well done."

I don't know why such a flame of anger filled my soul, a flame that matched my red hair. I am so used to being considered a gentle, yielding person that on the rare occasions when I lose my temper I am appalled by the depths in my own nature. Why should I be angry with Maria, who was doing her best to guard me from the supposed faults in my character? But to be thought an easy prey to workmen, a guileless dupe, was too much, especially as in my secret heart I knew that there was a grain of truth in what she said. I ought to adore Maria, as I did when we were school-girls, and I can merely like and respect her.

It seems such a little time ago when Maria and I were in the slender crescent stage of girlhood, with everything before us; and when I looked upon Maria, with her two years' superior age, as an infallible guide. Why I loved her so blindly it is hard for me to understand now. She was never pretty, but I always wished that my eyes and hair were black like hers, and that I was as small as she was instead of being a great

The First Step

overgrown girl. I admired her wit, even when it was at my expense, and she completely dominated me, for she had the same power she has now, the power that comes when one is sure of one's self. In fairness to her I must say that the years have improved her, and she is far more attractive now; for not only are her features less sharp, but she has grown up to her manner.

How well I remember the day when she pretended to warm her hands by the blaze of my red hair, and nicknamed me "candle" because I was so tall and slim in my white frock. The boys and girls tittered, and Maria's brother, the young assistant high-school teacher, rose in swift wrath and coming to my defense said that if I were like a lighted candle with its flame, Maria was like a short, burned-down one with its black wick. I ought to have adored him for his championship, but my gratitude was eclipsed by sympathy for Maria. I thought how hard it must be to live in the house with a brother who made such cutting remarks. How old Matthew Ripley seemed to me then! Now that he is my lawyer, instead of my teacher, it is surprising to find that we have become equals.

The First Step

He has sacrificed his life to an exacting mother and stayed in this quiet town, when he should have been making a name for himself somewhere else. She would like him far better if he had the prestige that can only be acquired by becoming a prophet in a country that is not one's own.

But to go back to Maria. When she said, "Shall I send Emmons around to-morrow?" the spirit of contradiction rose in me, and I replied, "No, thank you. The step is all right for the present, and I will wait until a few more jobs have accumulated."

Maria chatted on about one thing and another while Cornelia seemed more and more bored. As I looked across at her I wondered what she would have been like had I said "yes" to her father fifteen years ago when he wanted me to take care of him and his motherless child. She certainly would not have been trained to such implicit obedience, for nobody has ever minded me, neither man, woman, nor child, nor cat nor dog person. Even my old Betty, a legacy almost as welcome as the house, says, if I suggest that the parlor should be swept,

The First Step

"Your cousin Harriet never had it done on a Wednesday, Miss Isabel."

So, as life is a series of compromises, she sweeps when it suits her, and I enjoy her companionship, as I could not were we to have words about a little matter of dust; and it is a peaceful, congenial household; even the cat goes her own way regardless of my wishes, and doubtless the dog will if we have one, but I do not like to press the point, as both Betty and the cat oppose the idea. Yes, we are very happy in this dear old house, until Maria comes in, when the cat promptly leaves the room, and Betty prepares to combat all the suggestions I make the next day, as she is sure they have originated with Maria.

It always seemed a little odd to me that Maria should have married Cornelius Blake, after having warned me against him. She said I should be sure to marry the first man who asked me, simply because I could never bear to say "no"; and she added that Neal Blake was sure to die of consumption within two years and that his child would be very difficult to manage. I almost agreed to marry him, on account of what

The First Step

she said, for I was so sorry for him. But, after all, even I, with my desire to please, could not quite bring myself at nineteen to marry a man I did not love merely because he was threatened with tuberculosis and had a self-willed child of two. Yes, if I were Cornelia's stepmother I should be the one to obey, not she.

"There is one more thing I want to speak of," said Maria; "I don't suppose you have noticed how badly your house needs painting. You live in such a dream, Isabel, that unless your doorstep breaks down under you, or your piazza floor caves in, you will not notice that there is anything the matter with the house. It is just eighteen years since this house was painted and the clapboards are bare in places. If there is one thing I dislike it is a shabby white house. When you paint it again you had better have it a good serviceable gray like my house. Don't employ Gale; he is the man my brother recommends. Hazen is much cheaper and equally good. And by the way, Isabel, it is time you were planting your sweet peas."

My garden proved an engrossing subject for both of us, and this led to Maria's giving an

The First Step

account of a Garden Club she is starting. "It is for men as well as women," she said. "Mr. Whiting is enthusiastic about it."

"Who is Mr. Whiting?" I asked.

"Oh, have n't you met him? He's the architect for the new Episcopal church. He is quite a charming man, artistic, bookish, and that sort of thing, yet with a mundane streak too. He's not above coming to my house of an evening for a game of bridge and a cup of my good coffee. He is at the Ramsdell House which he hates with all his æsthetic soul. He wanted me to take him as a boarder, but although I may be poor I have never come to that."

"Is he young or old?" I asked.

"Young."

"Mother," said Cornelia, for the first time in the evening sitting up straight in her chair. "Why, he's quite old."

"My dear, he is just my age," said Maria complacently.

"As old as that!" gasped Cornelia.

"Do you suppose our point of view was like hers when we were seventeen?" said Maria with a good-humored laugh.

The First Step

I was sure mine was, for I remembered how old Cornelius Blake had seemed to me; but Maria had married him; poor Maria, doomed to see her own prophecy fulfilled almost literally, for her husband had died after a brief three years of married life.

“Ernest Whiting is coming to town again before long,” said Maria. “He is just the sort of man you would like. I must try to have you meet him,” she added as she went out of the front door.

II

I AM trying to make my kind friends understand that when a woman has lived alone in a city boarding-house, and earned her own living for six years, and has had to be polite at three meals a day to Tom, Dick, and Harry, or, more literally, to the feminine equivalent of these personages, living alone with faithful Betty in the country is such pure joy that she craves no other society. And besides, I seldom am alone for an entire day, for Maria and Cornelia are so good about dropping in for an evening or to a meal. But Maria and her brother Matthew are quite exercised about me. I have had various offers already, from persons who would like to come and live with me. There is a young lady who is unhappy at home and wants to be my companion. Her qualifications are that she can play and sing, and that the man she is engaged to has lately taken a business position in this town. She was personally unknown to me, but came to see me the other afternoon. I found her ensconced in the arm-chair engrossed with Eucken's "The Meaning

The First Step

and Value of Life," a book I have not yet had time to read.

"Miss Moor, how do you like Eucken's viewpoint?" she inquired.

I was so taken aback that I almost stammered my reply. She went on to assure me that she would be glad to give me her services in exchange for a home and the merely nominal sum of five dollars a week. I gently pointed out to her that my income is so limited that should I increase my household I should have to take some one in who would pay me, not I her. I think she must have spread this report, for soon after, I had the following note:—

"MY DEAR MISS MOOR, — I hear you are thinking of taking a boarder. Although personally unacquainted with you, I was in your cousin Mrs. Harriet K. Stone's Sunday-School class many years ago. I am a teacher in the public schools, of a cheerful disposition, and have always given satisfaction where I have boarded. Your house is so large and rambling I am sure you must often feel lonesome nights. Should you care to consider me in the light of a house-

The First Step

mate, should be glad to have a personal interview. I am sure the price for board could be arranged to suit us both. It has always seemed to me that two lonesome women have much in common, and that we could do a great deal for each other. Mr. Ripley and Mrs. Blake have known me for years and can vouch for my character."

No, I don't want any one, neither those I have not known, and still less those I know. Two of my friends in St. Louis have suggested coming to spend the summer with me, offering to share expenses. I suppose there is a certain pleasure in being where all are free to do as they like, including the cat, but the very circumstances that would give others freedom would be cramping to me. It is easy to adapt myself to dear, loving Betty and the cheerful, social cat; but if in addition I should have to consider others who might not share my peculiar views in regard to housekeeping, where should I be at the end of the summer? How, for instance, could I make a happy home at the same time for Fidelia Garrett, who has an aversion to

The First Step

cats, Jane Brown, who likes to have her breakfast in bed, myself, the cat, and Betty? It is pure bliss to be alone. Not for worlds will I share my kingdom with any one.

Ten days later. How it rains to-night! It is a pelting downpour. The wind has blown down the limb from the apple tree that Matthew Ripley pointed out to me some weeks ago should be cut off. But I will not give him the satisfaction of knowing it has happened; and, anyway, it is much cheaper to have it blown off by the wind. There are two bad leaks in the house, but if we have pleasant weather the roof will do very well. I simply will not spend any of my small income in fixing over this old house. It is a wonderful thing to have the gift of a house, but when one has not money enough to keep it up, the gift has its drawbacks.

I have sworn that I will be perfectly frank to myself, and so I am going to write down simply for future reference that I am so lonely to-night that I would gladly share my life even with the school-teacher of excellent moral character. Poor Cousin Harriet! How lonely

The First Step

she must have been after her husband died!

Betty has rheumatism again, and she went off to bed at eight o'clock, first having put the cat down cellar. In vain I pleaded that this social character should remain with me.

"You will be sure to forget to lock the cellar door after you put her down, Miss Isabel, and she would come up in the night and wake you up by mewling."

So I am quite alone, and just for to-night I should like to be back in the boarding-house in St. Louis. Yes, I have fallen from my high estate. No doubt I shall feel differently when the sun shines, but to-night I miss the dear faces I shall never see again. I never knew what it was to be lonely when my mother lived, and she died six years ago! Well, it is something that I have managed to keep my head above water for six years.

This rest and freedom from care is going to be a wonderful thing for me, only when I felt that the income of twelve hundred dollars a year that dear Cousin Harriet left me was enough to live on comfortably in addition to my own three hundred dollars a year, I did not know how

The First Step

much it costs to keep house. When I taught and was in a boarding-house I could live on very little, but now I have given up teaching it is different. I keep doing sums and adding my three hundred dollars a year to Cousin Harriet's twelve hundred. Sometimes I come out with quite a margin, as, for instance, to-night, but alas! I found I had forgotten to put down Betty's wages. Again I was amazed at my surplus, but discovered that I had omitted the food, and I always forget the taxes. Clothes I have relegated to the humblest position in the list. I shall dress chiefly in black on account of economy; still, judging by the past, even with all possible makeshifts, I am afraid they will cost one hundred and fifty dollars a year, instead of three hundred as they have done formerly. I shall wear crêpey shirt waists that I can do up myself, if Betty has n't time for it. Betty and I are going to plant the garden.

Oh! how it pours! Why did I ever feel that Maria and Cornelia came too often?

Just at this point the doorbell rang and in walked good, kind Matthew Ripley, streaming

The First Step

with rain at every point. His umbrella had been worsted in the contest with the storm, and two of its ribs had escaped from their moorings.

"Give it to me, and I will mend it," said I, glad to be of use to some one. His spectacles were blurred with rain and he blinked at me vaguely. Poor Matthew Ripley! It must be hard to be so near-sighted and so plain. There is a certain awkwardness about his tall, gaunt figure, but he is a comfortable person, when he is not too anxious for my welfare, and he has a genial smile, and a welcome sense of humor.

"I brought around that certificate for you to sign," he said, as he stepped into the parlor. "You ought to have a fire to-night, it's so damp," he added; and without any invitation from me he took some logs out of the wood-basket and some paper from the waste-paper basket and proceeded to make one.

I had been hoping I should not have to buy any more wood this spring.

"Where are your kindlings?" he asked.

"In the wood-basket in the passageway to the kitchen," I replied meekly.

The First Step

I was sorry I gave him this information, for when he came back he began at once to discourse upon the leaks.

"Now, Miss Isabel," said he, and I was immediately ruffled the wrong way. (Why not "Miss Moor," or if that seemed too formal from one who knew me when I was a child, why not "Isabel"?) "You must have your house thoroughly gone over by a carpenter if you intend to live in it. I know it will be an expense, but you need only have the bare necessities done this season, and do more next year."

Crash! Bang! We both started.

"A blind has blown off," said Matthew Ripley, getting up. "I'll go out and see to it."

"Please don't; it is no matter," I protested; but I might as well have talked to Betty or the cat. He quickly went out of the front door and being of an impetuous nature ran down the steps, but alas! the lower one gave way and he fell headlong into the muddy gravel path.

"I am so sorry you had such a fall. Are you very much hurt?" I asked anxiously.

"I am not hurt at all," he said angrily, as he rose and brushed the dirt from his face, "and

The First Step

I am not blaming you, but I think it is an outrageous imposition for an old woman to saddle you with a ramshackle house, and no money to keep it up. She ought to have left more to you, and less to the town charities. I am sure she made her will during a drought, or else she would have realized the condition of this house."

"It is a dear old house and very picturesque," I said stanchly.

"Picturesque," he repeated, rubbing his elbow. And then he said under his breath something that sounded extraordinarily like "Damn the house."

He examined the blind carefully. "Well, that's got to be mended before it can go on again," he said; "I will put it on the piazza."

In going out to the washroom to brush off his coat and wash his hands he found a leak in one of the pipes.

"I wonder if you have had your plumbing tested," he said. "It must be forty years old."

"I have had the plumber twice, and he says he thinks there is nothing seriously wrong. He

The First Step

says if you meddle with it too much it will go to pieces and I shall have to have it all done over. I can't afford new plumbing."

He took out the certificate and I signed my name in the proper place, and then we sat and chatted before the blazing fire. As he piled on the wood so lavishly, I thought how generous he and Maria are with other people's things. It seemed almost as if he could read my thoughts, for he said, "I have a wood-lot, and I am going to send you a load some day. I am afraid you haven't enough to last you until warm weather, unless you have some cut from your own wood-lot, which would be quite an expense. And if you will allow me, I'll come and mend your step. It is up to me to do it, since I broke it. My mother says I am as good as a carpenter, and she is chary of her praise."

"Indeed, I shall not let you do anything of the kind," I protested. "Imagine my letting you spend your valuable time mending my step, when you had a bad fall simply because I had not seen to it before. No, indeed, I can't impose on my friends like that. But if you will be so good as to send me the carpenter Maria

The First Step

recommended, I'll be forever grateful to you, for you know I have n't a telephone."

"I will see him to-morrow," said Matthew, "and tell him to come around as soon as the rain stops, but we seem to have started on a forty days' and forty nights' deluge."

III

I HAVE broken the news to Betty that Mr. Emmons is to mend the step. She takes it very hard, apparently not approving of carpenters.

"They all poke around and find things that would do well enough if let alone, Miss Isabel," she said.

"But, Betty, I can't leave my front doorstep broken."

"I could have fixed it so it would have done for a while. It would have lasted for years if Mr. and Mrs. Stone had lived," she observed gloomily. "Very few came over the steps then, but now you have a perfect menagerie of people coming morning, noon, and night, traipsing up the steps and walking over the rugs, and making remarks about everything that is n't just bran'-new. Why do they come if they don't like things? If they were going to pay the bills, that would be one thing, but I have n't heard that they propose to do that."

"Betty, I have n't had more than twenty callers since I came back," I remonstrated.

The First Step

"You've made it up by having the same ones over and over again," she retorted. I knew she had Maria in mind.

"You think Mr. Emmons is as good as any of the carpenters, don't you, Betty?" I asked anxiously.

Betty sniffed. "He's all right in his place," she acknowledged grudgingly. "He's a deacon in our church and he is conscientious, as carpenters go, but he employs union men and that makes him very dear. Don't you point out anything but that first step to him. It'll be time enough to mend the next thing when it gives out."

"The house really ought to be painted, Betty," I said tentatively. "It seems it is eighteen years since it was done."

"It is a good house," said Betty. "If it had n't been, the paint would n't have lasted so long. If it has lasted eighteen years, it will last twenty. Of course, if you have money to burn, Miss Isabel, that is one thing. In that case I won't bother with helping you plant your garden; you can send for an expert."

"Dear Betty, you know how grateful I am

The First Step

to you, and that I have to count my pennies carefully."

"If you have to count your pennies carefully why do you get the most expensive carpenter in town?"

I wonder if all carpenters have such an insinuating way with them as Mr. Emmons? He has such a frank, honest manner that one trusts him at sight, and his gray hair makes him look so elderly and respectable. It certainly is not his fault that Cousin Harriet's house is tumbling to pieces about our defenseless heads. He can't help it either that wood is very high just now.

I am going to write down my interview with Mr. Emmons so as to prove to myself that I could not help following his suggestions.

To begin with he had a very courteous way of taking off his hat, which put me in a good humor at once, for most of the tradespeople here have no manners at all. Then he was so thorough; he looked underneath and saw that the stringers of that step had given way.

"This is one of the finest old houses in Wilchester, Miss Moor," he assured me.

The First Step

I was greatly pleased. It was so unlike Matthew Ripley's point of view.

"It is a very old house," said Mr. Emmons. "These old houses were solidly built. You could not find a house built to-day standing the wear and tear so well. But the piazzas must have been added later. Have you ever had any trouble with your southwest piazza roof, any leak? It is n't quite plumb. That corner pillar sags a trifle."

"There is a leak in a very bad storm, but I don't believe we shall have another such down-pour all summer."

Next he lifted a board up from the piazza and, sure enough, Maria was right, the under-pinnings were rotting away. He stamped about on the piazza floor to show me how an accident might happen at any moment.

"What would it cost to put the steps and the piazza in thorough repair?" I asked.

I was frightened by the sum, but he had a way of hypnotizing me, and all he said was true. The house will be far more valuable when it is in good repair. I can do it little by little, a hundred dollars this year and a hundred next, and

The First Step

so on. I had n't intended to spend a hundred dollars in this especial way, but I can go without a new spring suit, which would be forty dollars.

Betty is not wholly satisfied, but, on the other hand, Maria is very much pleased.

Those who like to be agreeable to every one are apt to accumulate a set of friends with decided opinions, and it is difficult to have harmony among them all. However, it is something to satisfy Maria. The cat is not pleased at all. She departs the moment the carpenter comes and does not show up until he leaves at night.

I never understood before the true meaning of saving up for a rainy day; whoever invented the expression must have been confronted with circumstances like mine. I am glad I have five hundred dollars in the bank, so that I shall not have to touch any of my principal. That sum, with good management, ought to last for five years.

If it only could have been a dry spring then all these leaks would not have developed. There are two more that must be seen to.

The First Step

Something most unexpected and disastrous has happened, and literally out of a clear sky. Last night I was just dropping off to sleep when I felt a gentle trickle on my face. I looked out of the window and the stars were shining brightly. I lighted my candle and saw a wet place on the ceiling. As I was very sleepy I moved my bed and went back to it. It was lucky I did move it, for in the morning I found that the plaster had fallen. Betty and I made a thorough search and discovered that the tank leaked.

"The tank is quite new," said Betty in a depressed voice.

I suppose by "new" she means not more than ten years old. The man who made the tank is no longer living, so he cannot be held to account, but I will ask Mr. Emmons's advice and he will send us a good man.

Just then Maria dropped in, and insisted on going at once to telephone for the proper man. "I wish you did have a telephone, Isabel," she said, "it would save you a lot of trouble."

It seemed the tank was made all wrong, without the false bottom or saucer or whatever you call it that all properly brought up tanks should

The First Step

have. It is also lined with galvanized iron and should have been lined with copper. I can hardly wait until another year for all future repairs, as I had planned, even although I don't mind carrying pails of water upstairs. But as Betty insists on carrying most of it up, it is rather hard on her: dear, round, dumpling of a little person, as small and plump as I am tall and thin, with her white hair and her smooth pink cheeks!

It seems according to Mr. Emmons that Maria got the wrong tank man. What dark deeds this one has perpetrated I do not know, but if I had followed my impulse of trusting all to Mr. Emmons, things would have turned out better. There is an old feud between Mr. Emmons and Mr. Svendsen, for my American friend does not like foreigners. Also I believe there is a difference in religion, and then Mr. Svendsen does not belong to the union. However, Mr. Emmons acknowledged that he did good work, so I trust these will prove but minor drawbacks, but my household has been so harmonious hitherto that I dread the clash of these discordant elements.

Of course, the ceiling will have to be done

The First Step

over in my room; optimistic as I am by nature, even I can see that.

"Mr. Gale would be a good man to do the ceiling for you," Mr. Emmons said, when I asked his advice.

Mr. Svendsen gave his unasked.

"You will want that ceiling done, Miss Moor, and I know a so good man. He's cheap, he's very cheap; he'll not take all the pennies you have like these labor-union men."

"I am meaning to have Mr. Gale," I said, trying to be firm.

Mr. Svendsen shrugged his shoulders and made an expressive motion with his hands.

"So! He's the most expensive man in town."

"But does n't he do good work?"

"Sure! They all do good work, and if Miss Moor is a millionairess, she can afford to employ these people."

I was driven to asking Betty's opinion, and Maria's, and as they gave contrary advice I was no better off than before. I finally decided to have Mr. Gale, as it seemed fairer to Mr. Emmons.

Mr. Gale is a smooth, prosperous, polished

The First Step

person, a great comfort to have about, except that he does n't like foreigners any better than Mr. Emmons does.

I am learning the origin and true meaning of more than one old saw. Surely he was a wise Frenchman who made the proverb, "It is the first step that costs."

I wonder if carpenters were expensive in those days?

IV

I AM beginning to work a little. In default of a better place I have taken the back parlor as a workroom: I will not give it the pretentious name "studio." Just now I am painting some jonquils in a slender green vase on one of the claw-footed mahogany tables.

Cornelia seems possessed to drop in just as I have begun my morning's work. With that fatal gift of looking out for her own interests, which she shares in common with my furry friend, she avoids the early morning hours when I am doing the odd jobs which she could help me about. She came once at nine o'clock and found me brushing up the parlor and dusting it. She politely offered to help, and when I gave her a duster she stood gazing out of the window and talking while she pretended to dust the mantel-piece. Since that day she has discreetly timed her calls. She came in this morning with a bright smile and a bunch of the loveliest pink swamp honeysuckle.

"Cornelia, what a dear you are to bring

The First Step

me these flowers," I said, feeling conscience-stricken for having judged her so severely. "I will let you arrange them in that glass bowl while I go on with my work."

"What a perfectly fascinating scarf you are making, Miss Isabel," she said, picking up an unfinished scarf which was on the table. "Won't you teach me how to stencil?"

"I'll give you and the pussy-cat lessons at the same time."

"How very sarcastic of you. Do you think I'll scratch and bite?"

"I think you are both very charming persons in your own way."

We had a little general talk while the flowers were wilting on the table. I finally rose and arranged them myself.

At last Cornelia came out with the reason for her call.

"Should n't you think mother would just love to give me a coming-out dance this spring?" she asked.

"I should hardly think so," I said thoughtfully. "Of course it is a great expense, and she is out of the way of doing those things."

The First Step

"That is just what she says. I believe she has been talking to you," she added suspiciously.

"No. She has n't said a word to me on the subject."

"Well, she will, and I want you to hear my side of the story. It does n't seem fair, just because you are a widow, to get out of doing all the things you don't want to. Why, father's been dead thirteen years! I'm sure I wish he was alive. I've always thought it very hard not to have a father, but it does n't seem as if it ought to prevent my ever having any fun."

"You are an ungrateful little wretch," I said. "I am sure your stepmother could n't do more for you, if she were your own mother."

"Oh, she does a lot for my body, of course. She gives me pretty clothes and she sent me to a good school and all that, but when it comes to the things I really want —"

"Important things like the dance," I suggested.

"Just so. She is like — adamant. I thought you would sympathize with me and you don't a bit, you have the same horrid middle-aged point of view. I brought some slippers to show

The First Step

you that I bought in New York, in case mother gave me the dance. I have n't dared show them to her, but I thought you'd like to see them; you always seemed to have the young point of view so much more than mother."

"Do show them to me."

"Not if you are going to be hateful and think I am like the pussy-cat. Well, anyway, there is one grown-up person who wants me to have a good time."

"Who is that?"

"He's a great admirer of yours."

"Of mine?"

"Oh, you are beginning to sit up and take notice now."

"What a child you are!"

"I shall be eighteen soon," she announced with dignity. "This person does n't know you, but he has seen you crossing the street and he is just mad about your hair and the slim graceful way in which you walk. I told him it was no credit to you. We'd all walk that way if we had your figure. It's Mr. Whiting, the architect. He's crazy to meet you, and I am consumed with jealousy. He said, 'Who is that tall grace-

The First Step

ful girl in black with the wonderful Titian hair?' And I said you were almost as old as mother."

She talked on about the dance until I grew interested.

"You have such a lot of influence with mother I wish you'd suggest the party," she pleaded.

"I have n't any influence at all. It is she who has a great deal of influence with me."

"Mother says you are the most perfect lady she has ever known, and she wishes I had your good manners."

This was very gratifying. The child knows how to smooth fur as well as to rub it the wrong way.

"I will show you the slippers if you will be very, very good and not breathe a word about them to mother?"

"Could a perfect lady betray her young friend?" I murmured.

"She could if she had a darned New England conscience," she retorted.

"I have lived out of New England for many years," I reminded her.

She took the paper off her treasures and revealed a pair of white satin slippers with heels

The First Step

that were high to exaggeration. They had bows of a diaphanous silver material and two tiny pink rosebuds nestled in each one.

"They are the prettiest slippers I have ever seen," I said.

"I was thinking how perfectly fascinating one of those scarves you make would look to wear over my shoulders," she went on. "White, like mother's, only with pale pink and green figures. Do they cost a lot? Would you make one for me if I gave you the order?"

"Yes, they do cost a lot, but possibly I might make one for you at a reduced price," I suggested.

"I thought perhaps it would cost about four dollars," she remarked tentatively.

"If you will come and sing to me for a whole evening the next time it rains we will call it an even thing," I said.

"Oh, you delightful Miss Isabel," and she flung her arms about my neck. "But don't let's wait for the rain. I'll come to-night and I'll bring Uncle Matthew with me; he's crazy about my singing—that is, I will if grandmother will let him off. She's an old tartar, and he has

The First Step

to play chess with her, but she goes to bed at nine. Can we come at nine and stay till eleven? Uncle Matthew will see me home, and oh! Miss Isabel, if you could only get him interested in the party, perhaps he would pay for it. He has a lot of money. He's always doing nice things for us. We'd have even more money between us if we all lived in the same house, but any one who knows grandmother and mother would see that could n't work. Grandmother makes you feel as you do when you upset the pepper-pot into your soup, while mother is more like curry."

"You bad child, I wonder what you will be saying about me when my back is turned."

"Oh! you are like a chocolate peppermint — all sweetness outside and spice inside. You are the sweetest, most fascinating, dearest, most charming person that ever came into this town," she said.

V

THE preparations for the party took up so much of my time that I have not been able to write of late. Matthew Ripley agreed to pay for the hall, the spicy grandmother was brought to the point of giving Cornelia a new gown, and the perfect lady made her a scarf. By the way, the spicy grandmother and the perfect lady are in a fair way to become intimate. Spice always needs the smoothness of oil for its complement.

That evening of music was most delightful. Cornelia sang all my favorite songs for me. I watched her uncle's face, as he sat in the shadow, and saw that the music cast the same spell over him that it did over me.

"Would n't it be fun if mother would take me abroad and let me study for the opera?" Cornelia asked, towards the end of the evening, as she wheeled around on the piano stool. "Fancy mother chaperoning an opera singer!"

Cornelia did not seem bored that night. She was running over with good spirits. A sterner

The First Step

uncle than Matthew Ripley would certainly have been won over.

It seemed that on the way home Matthew had said that as he could not dance he should claim her for supper. She dashed in the next day to tell me this.

“I could n’t refuse the poor dear man when he’s giving me the party, but you can see yourself what a bore it would be to have to spend all that time with Uncle Matthew when I can have supper with him any time I choose just by going into the next street. So I’m going to get him to take you out. I know you won’t mind for once. I shall tell him I was sure you would be greatly hurt if he did n’t ask you for supper.”

Heartless Cornelia! But, after all, is unselfishness the supreme virtue? To be unselfish simply because virtue is its own reward would be selfishness in its subtlest form. Matthew Ripley is really and truly unselfish with no thought of any good that may come to him from it. He deserves better at the hands of Cornelia. When one is as plain and near-sighted as he, and as lacking in the ordinary graces of manner, un-

The First Step

selfishness is a valuable asset. Who am I to preach against unselfishness when I have not only a load of wood, but a bushel of potatoes in my cellar, provided by my kind friend?

But it is the Cornelias who get things. I wonder if Matthew Ripley ever wanted anything very badly in his whole life?

We were exceedingly busy over the preparations for the party. Cornelia inveigled me into painting dance cards for the girls, and while I was at work she sat in the armchair making suggestions, and her intimate friend, Annie Kimball, a shy little thing in spectacles, measured the cards very carefully, and printed the names of the dances most conscientiously. She brought me a book on butterflies for me to copy from, and I painted one in the left-hand corner of each card. Other girls in their spring frocks flitted in and out and stopped to perch for a moment, as gracefully and carelessly as the butterflies which I assigned to them.

I have painted a lunar moth on Annie Kimball's card; somehow it suggests her. I have enjoyed painting the cards, for the girls were so pleased.

The First Step

I spent the night at Maria's and went from her house to the dance, expecting to be a supplementary chaperon with her. I was sorry I had nothing to wear but my three years' old black party gown, but as it is cut somewhat low in the neck, I thought the old-fashioned skirt would not matter, as I did not expect to dance.

We spent the afternoon in decorating the hall. Mr. Whiting had been called out of town, so he could not help us, but he was to come back in time for the great event.

We certainly made the most of the dingy hall and turned it into a bower of spring. Old Mrs. Ripley insisted on being driven down to see it, as she could not come to look on. She is even shorter than Maria, but every inch of her small person dominates one. She came in on the arm of her tall son, making a kind of royal progress. In her other hand was an ebony cane with a silver top. It might have been the proverbial witches' broomstick, and one half expected to see her mount it and fly away.

Every one stopped work when she approached, and we all looked as if we had guilty consciences;

The First Step

but we need not have been so frightened, for her royal majesty approved.

"Very pretty," she said graciously. "Who is responsible for the decorations?"

"I fixed the flowers over in that corner," said Cornelia with pride.

"I thought it did n't look so well as the rest of the hall," said her grandmother.

"It is wholly Isabel's plan; all the credit is due her," said Maria generously.

"I thought as much; you have great taste, Isabel. You have n't been to see me for a long time. Maria says you know how to play chess. I'd like you to come to see me to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock. When I say four I mean four and not a quarter-past. You were late the last time you came."

I could see the web closing around me as she spoke; although my fate would not be entirely like that of the guileless fly, for those who went up Mrs. Ripley's winding stair came down safely, but were obliged to climb it again and again if they found favor with her. I thought her an extremely selfish, exacting old woman, and I could see no obligation which

The First Step

would make it necessary for me to be caught in her web.

Cornelia looked very beautiful that night, in her filmy white frock, and Maria and I were two proud chaperons. Matthew could not go with us to the hall, but was to come a little later.

As we were walking down the street a voice called out, "Mrs. Blake, may I join your party?"

It was a voice so full of music as it came out of the darkness that one felt how much charm there is left in life even for the blind.

"Good-evening, Mr. Whiting," Maria said, stepping back to walk with him.

I heard Mr. Whiting say something about "never having had the pleasure of meeting Miss Moor" and Maria's shrill voice answering, "Is it possible? I thought you must have met half a dozen times before this."

It was not the right moment for an introduction, for Cornelia and I were walking on rapidly.

Certainly Cinderella could not have been half so much surprised when she was lifted out of obscurity on the night of her memorable ball as

The First Step

I was that evening by the notice that was taken of me, for Cinderella was young and beautiful; but when one is thirty-four years old and clad in a shabby black frock; when one is watching, from the mild ranks of the elderly chaperons, a radiant young creature enjoying her coming-out party, it is as delightful as it is bewildering to be suddenly swept away among the dancers, and to be from that time forward a principal figure in the play.

It was early in the evening, and Maria and I were saying how lovely Cornelia looked when I again heard that musical voice say, "Mrs. Blake, will you be so kind as to present me to your friend?"

Maria introduced us rather ungraciously as if she felt it were not a suitable time for Mr. Whiting to be concerning himself with the middle-aged.

I was curious to see the owner of that voice, and my first glance at his slender figure, and expressive face with its fresh coloring made me wonder how even a girl of Cornelia's age could think him old, for he seemed endowed with perpetual youth. If it were not for some tell-

The First Step

tale lines in his face I should find it difficult to believe that he is my own age.

Maria seconded my refusal to dance with Mr. Whiting by saying, "Miss Moor came to look on and to be company for me."

"I have no doubt that is what she came for," he said, "but we often have surprises. She is going to give me this waltz, and later I am coming back for a dance with you, Mrs. Blake."

"With me! My dancing days are over," said Maria with asperity.

"I suppose mine ought to be over," said I, as we glided around the room.

I had not danced for more than six years, and I had felt I should never have the heart for it again, but the witchery of the music joined to the rhythm of my partner's perfect dancing went to my head, and I forgot time and place and was once again a young girl at my first ball. All of life seemed ahead of me instead of half of it gone.

"Take me back to Mrs. Blake, please," I said when the music stopped.

"There is much more room here," he said

The First Step

with a little amused laugh. "I have been wanting to know you ever since I first saw you," he began, as we sank into some seats on the opposite side of the hall from Maria. "Mrs. Blake kept throwing out hints that she would ask us both to supper some night."

"I was looking forward to that pleasure, too," said I, "but Mrs. Blake has been very busy over this affair and you have been in town very little."

"I have been here enough to have had several glimpses of you and of your quaint, your perfect setting."

"My what?" I asked, for the noise was deafening just then.

"I mean your adorable old house. I have seldom seen such a perfect specimen of the early Colonial. Every detail is so beautiful. Do you know how rare the fan is over your front door? The brass knocker, too, is a gem in itself, and the misty, blurry shade of green that the front door has acquired with years of service tells its own story, too."

Oh, how different from Matthew Ripley's unsympathetic verdict! Yet, having lived in the

The First Step

house honesty compelled me to see his point of view also.

"I am glad you like my house," I said cordially. "Perhaps you will come in some day. There is a quaint old staircase you might like to see, and some fine paneling."

"Do you know I have been on the point of coming once or twice? But we are such conventional beings, we moderns. The first time I saw you I was calling at the Brainerds, just opposite. Do you know them?"

"They have called two or three times. They are very kind neighbors."

"Yes. She's a regular Mrs. Nickleby, but they are the salt of the earth. They have a lot of money and got me the Episcopal Church to build, so I ought to speak well of them. Have you been inside their house?"

"No. They were out both times I called."

"You were lucky. Their house is so crude! It sets one's teeth on edge. Well, just as I was wondering why any man in his senses should want a large statue of the Venus de' Medici in a corner of his front parlor and a clock, — but I will spare you the description of that clock;

The First Step

the only good thing it does is to mark off the quarters and remind you that it is time to be going, — as I was thinking, ‘What contrasts there are: Here is this freak of a house with a French roof, built in our worst manner, and opposite is that dignified and beautiful home,’ for it is that in the true sense, — the door opened and you came out, half smiling to yourself and putting up your hand as if to shade your eyes from the too bright spring sun. You stopped to pick a spray of lilacs.” He paused, and added in a lower tone, “Who would expect to find one’s old dreams come true in a dull New England town?”

“Oh, but dreams are very misleading,” I said, “and especially architectural dreams. I thought mine had come true, and then one of my front doorsteps broke down and my tank leaked.”

“Please don’t, Miss Moor,” he entreated. “You don’t look as if you ought to know about such unpoetical matters.”

He talked on about one thing and another. He told me how one evening when I had left the shades up (how could I have been so care-

The First Step

less?) he watched me sitting by the fire reading, and almost rang the door-bell.

"I wish you had," said I.

Finally Maria sent Jim Green over to tell Mr. Whiting she wanted to see him about something, and Jim, good boy that he is, asked me to dance. Having once danced, I could not refuse to do it again without giving offense, and from that time on, one of those dear boys after another came up and begged me for a dance. It was their way of showing their gratitude for the help I had given them.

When it was time for supper, Matthew Ripley came up to me and said, "I hate to break into your good time, but Cornelia proposed that I should take you out to supper."

How tactless of him, and how exactly like him!

"Don't you suppose you are capable of giving me a good time?" I asked lightly.

He looked at me somewhat quizzically — "As a Scotch friend of mine says, 'I ha'e my doots.'" he replied.

"By the way, I have been meaning to thank you for those excellent potatoes," I said.

The First Step

“They are not as good as I wish they were. I was sorry to see that some of them had begun to sprout. It is a little late for them, but I am sure they are better than what you would get at the store.”

So with one man I discussed the things of the soul, or should have had I been willing to, and with another the things of the earth that are earthy. Of such diverse materials are friendships made!

Matthew's eyes wandered more than once to Cornelia as we were talking. He is evidently wrapped up in the child, who represents all the brightness there is in his gray life. She looked gay and happy and very pretty. She put out one foot in its dainty slipper and tapped the floor while she talked, and she kept hitching her shoulders and fingering the border of her filmy scarf. She had a crowd of boys around her and seemed to have turned into a full-fledged coquette overnight.

“I wish she had a little more dignity,” said Matthew with a sigh. “Maria has done so much for her and she seemed to have outgrown the hoydenish age, but the minute she is left

The First Step

to herself she has a relapse. You could do a great deal more for her than we can; she admires you so much, and you are nearer her age."

"I am only two years younger than Maria. I am an old person to Cornelia. Every girl goes through this stage unless she is plain or shy."

"You did n't. You always knew just how to behave under all circumstances." He spoke seriously as if he were not intending to pay me a compliment, but merely stating a fact as obvious and dry as a sum in mathematics.

"I was shy."

"You never seemed shy."

"Oh, I was n't shy with you. No one could be afraid of you."

For some reason he did not seem pleased with this remark. Presently he looked across at Cornelia again and muttered something under his breath.

The lively group of lads around her had been scattered and Mr. Whiting was sitting by her side and talking to her as if she were the only woman in the whole world. I never knew a more consummate flirt. Mr. Ripley peered at his

The First Step

niece and her companion through his spectacles, half shutting up his eyes. "That's Mr. Whiting, is n't it?" he asked in a worried voice.

"Yes, he seems to find Cornelia as charming as the boys do," I said.

After seeing the air of devotion with which Mr. Whiting hung over Cornelia, I was surprised, I must own, to have him come to see me the next afternoon. I am not going to describe his first call, as it certainly is not going to be his last. Maria says that three calls in one week is making me talked about already, but what can I do if he chooses to come? I have no doubt he has been still oftener to see Cornelia. He certainly reads poetry aloud with much feeling in his wonderful voice; and although personally I am not so fond of discussing the things of the soul with an acquaintance of a week's standing as he is, I am not prepared to affirm that it is impossible for those who speak freely of their feelings to have as deep ones as those who never speak of them at all. He must be all things to all women, for if he were to talk to Maria as he does to me, she would never put up with him

The First Step

for a single moment, and he often goes there to supper or to play bridge.

In a way it is pleasant to have reached the time of life when one is "out of it" emotionally. I am experienced enough to take Ernest Whiting's attentions for what they are worth. He finds me sympathetic and my house rests and pleases him. He certainly makes a diversion in my quiet life. I hope he does not mislead Cornelia. I should have been misled by such a show of devotion when I was eighteen; but I think she is experienced enough already to play the game.

VI

MEANWHILE during the time that I have been letting my serious painting go (my own, I mean, and not that connected with the house) and decorating cards for the dance, because, as Maria has frequently remarked, I can never bear to say "No," the piazza has been renewing its youth, quite as much as I have mine, but the tank, alas! has been at a standstill, owing to the illness of Mr. Svendsen. I had heard rumors that he drank, but I would not believe it at first. It is too true, however, for when I proposed going to his house with broth, which I felt sure his wife would be glad of for him, an odd expression came into Matthew Ripley's face.

"I would n't do that," he said. "Svendsen's illness, I fear, is not one that will be helped by broth."

"Why did Maria recommend him if he is a — not reliable?" I asked.

"Because he is cheap and does his work well when he is sober, and Maria keeps an iron hand over him and won't let him off the place; but

The First Step

she said you let him go to Boswick one day last week."

"Yes. He seemed very anxious to go."

Matthew threw back his head and chuckled.

"I cannot see why that amuses you so much," I said. "You wouldn't find it a laughing matter if you were in my place. Betty and I are getting a little tired of carrying pails of water upstairs. I never knew a more beguiling person than Mr. Svendsen, with his handsome, foreign face and his broken English, but I did n't engage him for light comedy, and all the work he has done so far is to take down the old tank."

"I was afraid you would have trouble with Svendsen," he said. "Have you ever thought it might be better to put in new plumbing this summer? I hate to suggest anything that will involve you in extra expense just now, but I am afraid you will have to put in new plumbing before long if you stay in this house. If you did it now you would n't require this kind of tank and could save yourself that much. As Svendsen has failed to do his work you could easily get rid of him by getting him and the three other plumbers in town to make bids."

The First Step

"Bids?" I gasped. "You mean I should have to decide which man to take, and turn down the others?"

"Does that strike you as so formidable?" he asked with a smile.

"But they would be so disappointed, and I should have given them all that trouble for nothing, and the cheapest one might n't do the best work."

He looked at me indulgently, as he looks at Cornelia, as if he thought me a very foolish young thing, but rather liked me in spite of it.

"How much do you suppose new plumbing would cost?" I asked.

"A great deal, I am afraid, but not so very much more than doctor's bills, and a doctor's bill is even less cheerfully paid. Why not have your plumbing tested? If it is safe for a while longer you can put off the work."

Oh, dear! I have moments of wishing I had n't taken his advice. I have been very well in spite of that iniquitous plumbing and Betty's rheumatism can have nothing to do with that; and as for her sore throats, she says she has had

The First Step

them ever since she was a child. She goes darkly about the house saying that everybody has entered into a league to rob me of my money for their own selfish purposes, and when I ask her what Mr. Ripley and Mrs. Blake can possibly get out of it she purses up her lips but says nothing. . . .

I have stayed awake three nights over those bids. Two of them came out exactly alike to a cent, which seemed to me a little odd, to say the least. Mr. Emmons said dryly that these coincidences often occur. The third bid is eleven dollars less, while Mr. Svendsen, who has apparently been making calculations from his sick bed, asks fifty-three dollars less than the first two men on the list. But I can't have him, if he is going to keep leaving me in the lurch. Betty won't give her opinion, which is so unusual that I think she can't have one.

I had almost decided on Mr. Poole, Mr. Emmons's first choice, when, unfortunately, I went to a meeting of the Garden Club at Maria's house, and my faith in all plumbers became greatly shaken. I had been looking forward to the occasion with pleasure, partly be-

The First Step

cause it was not to be an exclusively feminine affair like most of the Wilchester clubs. It was, therefore, somewhat of a disappointment to find the masculine element represented merely by old Mr. Bradford and Mrs. Brainerd's young son, Tom.

It seems Matthew, with the frankness of a brother, told Maria he could not waste his time coming to her meeting, while Mr. Whiting, who was so enthusiastic about the club, had been called to New York. The man of seventy and the boy of eighteen seemed equally ill at ease among so many women (we came out strong, there were fifteen of us). Whenever Mrs. Brainerd spoke, and she is so made that she can't help doing it most of the time, Tom looked as if he hoped to goodness no one thought he was in sympathy with his mother's remarks, while Mr. Bradford had a "you-don't-catch-me-here-again" expression on his fine old face.

We were to have had afternoon tea on the piazza that overlooks Maria's garden, but an untimely summer shower drove us into the house.

In an unfortunate moment we strayed from pansies to plumbers. Mrs. Bradford encour-

The First Step

aged me by saying, "I hear you are going to have new plumbing; you can't do better than to employ Poole."

Then Mrs. Brainerd spoke. "Poole! He may be all very well to stop a leak, but these country plumbers don't know enough to do a big job like yours, Miss Moor. When my husband and I decided to have new plumbing put into our house, we sent to New York. 'Spare no expense, Olivia,' he said. 'Have all the bathrooms you want and get the biggest man in New York City for the job. Nothing is too good for you.' So we have four bathrooms. I advise you to put in plenty while you are about it, Miss Moor."

"I have very little money," I said modestly. "I am afraid one of the Wilchester plumbers will have to do for me."

"Don't have Poole on any account," spoke up Mrs. Kimball. "He put the plumbing in on the north side of our house and it froze."

"But, mother," said Annie, "you know he advised you not to put the plumbing in where you did, but you said —"

"Never mind what I said. It is the business

The First Step

of a plumber to insist that one shall not make a mistake of that sort."

And so on *ad infinitum*. I found before the afternoon was over that each of my four plumbers was the one infallible plumber in town, and also that he had made two or three fatal mistakes.

So I am no better off than I was before, and neither have I got many new ideas for my garden.

Mr. Whiting is in town again, and he came around to see me this afternoon with a book of poems of which he had spoken. He seems to me, compared with the blunt townspeople, like velvet beside homespun. They all know each other so well that they say exactly what they think, as one does to one's family; while he always says the courteous, pleasant thing. Velvet, day in and day out, might not wear so well as homespun, but when one is leveled to the ground with perplexity and small cares the sight of him is a blessed relief.

"It is good to get back," he said, sinking into the easy-chair. "I have missed you." When one

The First Step

meets vital people they make other people seem like shadows."

"Yes, that is just the way I feel about Mrs. Blake," I said; "both she and her brother are so genuine that they are refreshing."

I have never let him be sentimental with me, and perhaps that is why I have not already begun to bore him.

He was reading a poem of Noyes's aloud when Maria came in. Maria is looking better than I ever saw her this summer. I think the fact that Cornelia is such a social success has put her into a happy frame of mind, and then I have persuaded her to wear a more becoming hat.

"What are you reading?" she asked. "Go right on; I shall be sure to like what Isabel likes." But he firmly closed the book.

"My dear Mrs. Blake, I should as soon think of reading you this as of reading Miss Moor a treatise on bridge."

"Have you decided on your plumber yet?" Maria asked.

I shook my head.

"You won't get the work done before autumn if you don't start in soon." She took off her hat

The First Step

as she spoke. "I can stay to supper if you want me to, Isabel," she said.

"Mrs. Blake, how delightful to have the privilege of an old friend. I, too, could stay to supper if she wanted me."

"Isabel invariably says 'yes,' to any proposition," said Maria. "That is why she finds it difficult to decide between four plumbers."

"Do you always say 'yes,' Miss Moor?" he said, in his silkiest voice. "I'll make a note of that. But tell me about the plumbers. Perhaps I could help you make up your mind. Do you care to show me their estimates?"

I produced them with alacrity, and he and Maria decided that I must pin the men down to more definite details.

"This fellow does n't say whether he will give you galvanized iron pipes or iron-sized brass," he said, "nor whether the bathtub is to have the two-year or five-year guarantee."

"Oh, I must have it guaranteed for more than two years if I go to the expense of putting it in," I said; and both he and Maria laughed.

It was Betty's afternoon out, as Maria knew.

The First Step

She is very good about coming to keep me company and help me get supper on these occasions, but I was not especially eager to have Mr. Whiting stay. He is the sort of person one wants to keep at arm's length. He took it for granted that we were both longing for his society and offered to help us get supper, but Maria was firm about this and told him he could stay in the parlor and practice reading the poems while we were in the kitchen.

"If there is anything I do hate it is a man fussing around and trying to help," she confided to me.

When we three were in the dining-room, Mr. Whiting went into raptures over my mahogany table and the old silver. He also admired the paneling.

"What a shame that the paper is so out of keeping with the rest of the room," he added. "It was evidently put on in the worst period."

"It does rather set one's teeth on edge," I admitted, "but it is comparatively new, and I can't afford to make any more improvements this year."

"A yellow paper, not too bright, is what this

The First Step

room demands," he went on. "I have just the thing in my mind. The mahogany furniture and the dull gilt frames would look so well against it. Then you could get in the necessary touch of blue in the window curtains and rug. You know, of course, Miss Moor, that a yellow room has a most depressing effect unless it has some of its complementary color introduced?"

"I was under the impression that yellow rooms were very cheerful," I said.

"That is the ordinary idea, but if you have ever lived in a yellow room you will have noticed the dampening effect it has on the spirits, unless it has blue in it."

"I shall have Cornelia's room done over at once in yellow without any blue," said Maria dryly. "I have been trying to find some way of subduing her spirits."

Mr. Whiting was evidently sensitive to Maria's banter, for after that he talked in a very sensible and shrewd way on various topics. Just as we were finishing supper he returned to the subject of the dining-room.

"What a pity there is only that small window on the east side," he said. "The piazza on

The First Step

the north exposure must make this a dark room in winter."

"It is rather dark even in spring," I admitted.

"Miss Moor, don't think me a terrible meddler if I make a suggestion, but have you ever thought what a wonderful room you could have if you knocked out the end and made a window the whole length of it? Not a bay window, but a recess about two and a half feet deep, glassed in? You could have a window-seat there in summer and a conservatory the rest of the year. Fancy it filled with jonquils and daffodils," he went on, "and you in a white gown watering them!"

"You would have to have a watering-pot painted blue," said Maria; "otherwise I am afraid you would have nervous prostration, Isabel, among all those yellow flowers."

"I wish I could afford to have the window," I said. "I had thought of it myself, but it would cost too much."

"Not so very much, if I drew the plan for you and overlooked the workmen to see that they did n't make any blunders. One can often do a thing cheaper by having an architect, as he

The First Step

sees that the men put in good material and fulfill their part of the contract. Why, I knew a lady who actually had her house shingled with ordinary cedar shingles, when the contract demanded the red cedar ones, and she paid the bill and never knew the difference. She was just about to have galvanized iron pipes put in instead of the specified iron-sized brass, when she got hold of me, and I stepped in and made things hum for a while."

I had a fellow-feeling for this lady, and thought how peaceful it would be to turn everything over to him. But an instinct of self-preservation saved me from doing it, for there is no telling how deep in I should get, and Mr. Emmons is so honest he does not have to be watched. I do mean to have the window sometime, however. It would be the making of the room.

VII

MEANWHILE, as I said before, Mrs. Ripley and I are becoming friends. I am growing really fond of her. She has Maria's spiciness, but a certain fascination that her daughter lacks. She must have been very beautiful in her young days. I do not pity Matthew quite so much as I did, for, as he is the sort of person bound by his character to be some one's slave, I am glad the some one has charm.

She is very alert and nothing escapes her. The last afternoon I was there she looked out of the window and said, "Who are those people walking in the lane?"

I looked out and recognized Cornelia's brown corduroy frock in the distance, while I felt sure that no one but Mr. Whiting could be bending over her with such an air of gallantry.

"Give me my binoculars," said Mrs. Ripley.

As I handed them to her she observed suavely, "Matthew gave me these glasses so that I could study the birds. They are very strong and can

The First Step

be adjusted to suit each eye. I have one far-sighted and one near-sighted eye."

Of course she had. It seemed perfectly in character.

"Yes, I thought so," she said. "It is Cornelia and Mr. Whiting. I wonder if they met by appointment, or if she happened to run across him, although one is often the same as the other. Look! She's making him pick a spray of pink hawthorn in the Bradfords' garden. He went through a thin place in the hedge! Well, I never! That beats me when I was a girl! Do you know, Isabel, this house stands so high that I can get a very good view of the adjacent country? I saw you planting your sweet peas the other day. You put them in too close together, and I tried to make Matthew go down and give you advice, but he would n't."

"Poor Mr. Ripley! I should think he had enough on his hands without that!"

"Oh, it was n't that he minded going, but he said it was n't any business of his how you planted your sweet peas. I expect he feels he has interfered a little too much."

I was rather conscience-stricken, for, though

The First Step

I have tried to be outwardly hospitable to his suggestions, he has such a way of reading one's thoughts!

Mrs. Ripley likes to have me come to play chess with her on the evening that Matthew goes to his bridge club.

"If I were a selfish mother," she remarked the other night, "I should put my foot down against that club, but I can see that Matthew needs some amusement besides his law practice, and being an overseer of the poor, and on the school committee, and taking every other thankless office that no one else wants to fill; and then, Isabel, I think it is for his advantage to meet all the best men in town socially; and besides, to be strictly honest, I don't think I could have prevented his going to it if I had tried; Matthew is very set once he makes up his mind. It is a trial to me to have it meet once a week, and he comes home with his clothes smelling so of smoke that I notice it all the next day. I never allow him to smoke at home."

"That seems rather hard," said I. "Could n't he have some sort of a den and smoke in it?"

"A den? I abominate these new names for

The First Step

things. Indeed he could not! My house is my castle. It is bad enough to have him smoke in the garden, for the smell often drifts in just as I am dropping off to sleep. I have no doubt if you had a husband, Isabel, you would let him smoke all over the place."

"I dare say I should," said I, thinking of my general course.

"You'd make a great mistake. A man respects a woman a great deal more if she lays down the law. I always made my husband keep his proper place, and he adored me, and so does Matthew."

"But suppose you had happened to marry the other sort of man," I suggested, — "the dominating sort who would have kept the upper hand?"

Her eyes took on a softened, far-away look. It was as if she were suddenly taken back into the past. My careless words seemed to have lifted the curtain, and I felt I had had a glimpse into the most intimate memories of her life.

"Strange that you should say that," and she turned to look at me. "I don't mind telling

The First Step

you, what my children have never known, that I was madly in love with just the man you describe when I was seventeen. And he cared no more for me than your Mr. Whiting does for Cornelia."

"I did not know — I did not mean —" I began.

"I know you did n't, but I am going to tell you the whole story now."

I tried to stop her, but I soon saw it was a comfort to her to confide in me, and since the pitiful little tale of innocent girlish devotion and careless indifference has been told we have become closer friends.

"Right glad am I, I never married him," she concluded. "He would have made me miserable, but an experience like that is one that a proud, high-spirited girl does not soon get over. I have been a more cynical woman all my life because of it. I hope Cornelia won't have the same. Thank Heaven, she is no blood relation of mine, and has quite a different temperament. My own children have escaped, too. Maria is practical and hard-headed. To be sure she did an unworldly thing when she married Cornelius

The First Step

Blake: perhaps in the depths of her secret heart she is more romantic than one thinks; but as for Matthew — so far as I know, Matthew has never looked at a woman. Do you know, Isabel Moor, that you, almost a stranger to me two months ago, have learned more of the real 'me' than my children, who have been my close companions for more than thirty years?"

"It is often so between those of the same household," I said. "I have no doubt that both Matthew and Maria have had their own hard experiences."

"You mean you think Matthew has been in love, and I have never known it?"

"I did n't mean anything in particular, only that men and women never reach our age without having a good many hard knocks."

"You speak as if you had had the experience of all the ages," she said. "Have you ever been in love, you soft-spoken, delicate, cold, refined thing?"

I paused for a moment. "It would be equally true if I were to tell you I had never been in love, or that I had been in love many times," I said.

VIII

It is strange to be homesick in one's own house! I wish I had n't gone to church to-day! I feel sure the exchange minister is a happy husband and father with a flourishing family of at least seven children, and his sermon must be very useful to them. It was not so well suited to a solitary spinster. He told us never to let a day go by without doing at least three acts of kindness for those we love best, and telling them in unreserved language how dearly we love them. His cheerful sermon has sent me into a fit of the blues, for I no longer have any one belonging to me that I love best; that is the sad truth. I went back to those days after my father's death when my mother and I became all in all to each other. I was too busy earning enough to piece out our slender income to have time to make any new friends, and the two stanch ones I had had since my childhood were all that I needed; but after Katharine died and Emily married and went to Japan, much of the spice of life was gone. Then came those wonderful

The First Step

years abroad when my mother and I spent our winters in Paris and traveled in France and Germany and Italy in the summers. It was only a little more than two years after our return to America that I had the crushing sorrow of my mother's death. I gathered myself together somehow and continued to teach little school-girls to draw and paint.

This morning I looked across the aisle at the pew where Maria and Cornelia sat with Matthew Ripley at the end. I thought how fortunate they were: even Matthew appeared to me fortunate to-day, for if he cannot call his soul his own, he at least has the inexpressible satisfaction of knowing that he is the dearest object in life to an exacting mother. I imagined him taking the sermon to heart and going home to think up at least three more things to do for her. I wondered if he could bring himself to tell her how dearly he loved her, — showing his feelings is not much in his line, — and then I came home and ate my solitary dinner, and have been too blue all day to inflict myself on others.

I have been counting up my friends and I

The First Step

have a lot of good ones, but they are just "good friends," nothing more. It is doubtless partly because I have so many that I am not necessary to any one of them. I decided that Mary Lansing is the dearest person in life to me now, and so I have written her a long letter, saying I do not as yet see my way to making her the visit she asked for, on account of the repairs on my house, but that if she should really need me any time to let me know and I will come.

To-night I wish that my house, like the snail's, were on my back, so that whenever the spirit moved me to see one especial friend I could start at my snail's pace with the house, and dear Betty in a compartment with her faithful cat. What nonsense I am writing!

But if any one thinks it is pleasant to be independent and free from family ties let them try it! In St. Louis I was at least too busy to have time to think. Of course I am very grateful to Cousin Harriet for giving me this house; at least I am grateful every day except Sunday; but Sunday is the day when those who are set in families are together, and Sunday is so long! And there are no cheerful men around whistling

The First Step

as they work, or having a spicy argument as they eat their lunch. I have a Catholic and a Jew and a Protestant, all three, on hand now.

I hope Mr. Whiting's advice about the plumber was good. I do miss him, — Mr. Whiting I mean, — and I shall be glad when he comes back. It is not always the people we respect most and like best that we miss the most; on the contrary, one often misses a somewhat inferior man more than a superior woman; at least one does in New England where men are few.

If it were any day but Sunday I should go up to see Mrs. Ripley, whose tartness is always a moral brace; but Matthew is there on Sunday, and I could not have the heart to break in on their *tête-à-tête*. I wonder what they do on Sunday afternoon? They can't play chess. She might n't mind, but I am sure he would n't play. He is probably reading the Sunday papers and she is looking through her binoculars, "studying birds!"

Evening. No one has called and I have become a deeper and deeper shade of indigo. I am the more depressed because the moon is

The First Step

in the same entrancing half-grown state she was in when I began this record. Happy and most fortunate moon to have the chance to begin at the beginning every month; to pass from a slender crescent gradually to glorious fulfillment, and then after her sad decline to have another chance to go through those delicious days of early youth! Alas, if we human beings could only know at eighteen which are the things in life that really count!

I long to pass on my experience to Cornelia and to tell her to do ten times more for her mother and for the uncle who loves her so dearly; and when she is knitting on her perennial necktie that she has promised to half a dozen youths, I want to say, "Child, thank Heaven on your bended knees for all that is real, for all true affection, but don't fritter away your time in 'making-believe.'" But my advice would do no good, for each of us in turn brushes aside all vicarious experience and thinks the elder generation has no sympathy with youth.

"Things are very different now," Cornelia would say.

So I do not preach sermons, and she does half

The First Step

an inch more on her necktie and hands it over to me if she drops a stitch, and tells me she has promised it to still another man.

"Guess who has begged for the necktie now!" she asked the last time she came to see me.

"Mr. Whiting?"

"Yes. What made you guess right straight off?"

"Because you had already promised it to every one else."

"I don't like chocolate peppermints," she retorted. "They are such a surprise."

"He won't get it," I said coolly.

"Why not?"

"Because his work here will be done long before yours is. It is a simple matter to build the Episcopal church in comparison with making this necktie."

"You are perfectly horrid, and I am never going to play with you in your back yard any more."

"That is too tragic for words."

"Well, anyway, I shan't come again for a whole week."

The First Step

"Could n't you make it four days? I think I could finish painting these irises if I had three mornings to myself."

"The chocolate got left off the peppermint that time," she observed. "By the way, Mr. Whiting is crazy over your flower pictures; he says they are so Japanese. I have no doubt you have promised him a picture."

"Indeed, I have not."

"You would have, I am sure, if you were young like me. Any one who likes to please the way you do, and hates to hurt people's feelings, must have been an awful flirt when she was a girl. Mr. Whiting says he should suppose the carpenter was your favorite uncle and the plumber your spoiled younger brother by the way you treat them. Honestly, now, you were a flirt, were n't you, when you were eighteen?"

"No, I am sure I was n't."

"Well, then it must have been because there was no one to flirt with, for any one who kept four plumbers on tenter-hooks, each expecting to get her job because she was so awfully sweet to them all, must have flirted when she was a girl if she got the chance."

IX

OH! what a wonderful, glorious spring this has been from the moment I first came into the house! The trees were leafless then, but they had just a faint touch of color in their swelling buds, and the pussy-willows welcomed me as they did in my childhood. Then came a high carnival of apple blossoms fringing the lanes, and the song-sparrows are back now, and every feathered creature haunts the orchard behind my house. I welcome them all, even the English sparrow that is beginning to make a home for herself in the west window of my bedroom. Poor creature, I have deep sympathy with her house-building instincts, for it is the nature of all things feminine to try to make a home. I suppose, just as she gets it built to her satisfaction, poor dear! the painter will get around to that side of the house and she will have to find another situation. Does she, too, as soon as she starts on the act of building, have that longing for perfection that is the curse of the human race? Happy little workwoman, to be able to

The First Step

build but in one pattern like that of her grandmother! There is no question with her of knocking out the end of her mansion and putting in a window. Really the half of me is such a gypsy and so keen for out of doors that I could have lived with complete happiness in my shabby house had not that first step given way.

Matthew is beginning to look quite worried, for he does not know where I am going to stop, and being the trustee of Cousin Harriet's property, he is afraid of my making ducks and drakes of my possessions. I suppose it's a fortunate thing for me that my income of twelve hundred dollars a year is merely for my life, and that I can't touch the principal. Now that the thousand dollars that she left me outright in stocks has been reinvested to such advantage that I get over five per cent instead of three and a half, Matthew can't bear to have me think of selling anything to help pay for the repairs.

The five hundred dollars in the savings bank will not begin to cover the necessary improvements, such as the new plumbing and the painting, and as I have spent so much already it seems wiser to go on and do all I shall ever want

The First Step

to do at once. With the house painted, and a new furnace so I can be comfortable in the winter, if I should ever stay here all the year round, the absolute necessities will be done,—oh, I forgot that the house will have to be shingled,—but not a single one of these bare necessities will give me any real pleasure; whereas, if I change the paper in two or three rooms, and put in the deep window in the dining-room, and turn the top of the back porch into a sleeping-porch, my somewhat ordinary house will be a real joy to me. Fancy sleeping among the tree-tops with the stars above me, and all the birds in the universe for my neighbors! I am going to have it open save for a sheathing that will come up so far that I shall be hidden from view. Maria says that I ought to have it screened with wire netting on account of the mosquitoes, and Mr. Whiting is sure that the light will bother me if I don't have curtains at the east end; but mosquitoes never trouble me; and, besides, I can't afford the extra expense; and then those prosaic things seem to take away all the poetry of sleeping out of doors.

Certainly Mr. Whiting has been most kind,

The First Step

and really sympathetic about the house. He sees my point of view. It was good of him to have my desires so much in mind as to bring me back samples of wall-papers and curtains from New York. And yet he never gives the impression that he is meddling, as Maria and Matthew occasionally do. When he showed me his samples he expressly said, "I know you have decided not to have this work done at present, but, as I was getting samples for another house, I thought I might as well bring some back to you, just to give you an idea which need not be worked out for five years."

He had also taken the trouble to draw an architect's plan of the window on blue paper.

Betty has taken a perfectly unreasonable dislike to him. Apparently it arose from his speaking harshly on one occasion to her cat.

"I never trust a man who has such good manners, Miss Isabel," she said one day. "You may be sure they are only skin deep and that he will let up on them some time. I noticed how pleasant he was to the cat when you were around, speaking so soft and trying to get her

The First Step

to sit on his knee, and she that scared of him that she cleared out of the parlor, and I thought to myself, 'He's a man that animals have their own reasons for not trusting,' and it was just so. The other afternoon when you were out he came in and said he would wait until you came back, and if he did n't shoo the cat out of the arm-chair with a real vicious 'scat.' He did n't know I was where I could hear him, but I was. Now Mr. Ripley never makes any pretenses; half the time he ignores the cat, but all the same she comes and climbs up on his knee, and the other night he brought her some catnip. And it was n't for the sake of pleasing you either, for he knew you had gone out to supper. He came in and he said, 'Here is a certificate I will leave for Miss Isabel; be sure and give it to her when she comes back, and I've brought a little fresh catnip for *your* cat.' (He realized the cat belonged to me.) He said it was some he growed in his garden for his mother's cat. He's worth ten of the other man."

"Of course he is," I agreed cheerfully; "but he is n't an architect, and that is what I need just now."

The First Step

"Mr. Whiting is an architect who is able to look out for his own interests," Betty retorted. "You'll see he'll get a good thing out of the job."

"I hope he will. I certainly don't expect him to do my work for nothing."

"I don't think Mr. Ripley likes him one bit better than I do," Betty volunteered.

I did not ask any questions, but I saw she hoped I would.

"They are both very good friends of mine," said I, "and I don't see why liking one of them should prevent my liking the other."

"Of course Mr. Ripley would never say anything against another man," Betty went on; "he is n't that sort; but when I said, 'You have the interests of this household at heart, Mr. Ripley, even down to the cat, more than some others that I could mention,' he said straight out, 'I suppose you mean Mr. Whiting. He's a very clever man and a good architect; she could n't do better than to employ him'; but he did n't deceive me, he said it in such a tone he might just as well have said, 'I hate the man.'"

The First Step

Before I decided to have the window put in I told Mr. Whiting frankly just how I was situated, and that I could not do it if it were too expensive, and he made me a very reasonable estimate. Even this, however, in addition to my necessary repairs, made the work come up to more than I felt I had the right to pay.

"I am sorry," said I, "but I am afraid I ought not to afford it."

"Is n't there something you could sell that is of no practical good to you, something like a pasture or a wood-lot that you have to pay taxes on, and which would be a burden to you to keep up? It is no affair of mine, and I merely asked because a man, knowing I was a friend of yours, asked me if I thought you would sell some of your land to him."

"I do have a wood-lot up on North Mountain; but I thought I would like to keep it and build a shack there some day."

"This man offered six hundred dollars for it. I have no way of knowing the value of it, but you could find out what it is taxed for and double the valuation. On general principles, Miss Moor, you can be sure that every one in

The First Step

the business world is anxious to get things as cheap as possible."

When I mentioned to Matthew this chance to sell my property, his face darkened. I never saw him look so angry.

"Are you thinking of closing with the offer?" he asked. I saw Betty had not been drawing on her imagination. If he had sworn at me he could hardly have conveyed a stronger impression of his displeasure.

"No; if I had, I should not be coming to you for advice."

He seemed somewhat mollified.

"I beg your pardon, Isabel," he said, "but I have been wanting to buy that wood-lot ever since I was a lad. I had no idea you would be willing to sell it, or I should have come to you about it long ago. It joins mine, and I have been simply aching to get the chance to clear out the dead trees and do a bit of forestry there. Your cousin would never sell it. The gypsy moths have got in and are a menace to my own trees. But for all that I don't advise you to sell it. You will be sorry if you do. Six hundred dollars is no price for it at all. I would give you a thou-

The First Step

sand dollars, cash down, any day. But you will regret it all your life if you do sell."

"I had no idea it was such a valuable piece of land," I said. "I suppose you think I am a very shiftless landowner not to have been up to see it yet, but I was too busy at first, and then the rainy weather came."

"I'll drive you up there some afternoon and show it to you. You never saw a finer bit of primeval forest: I don't mean literally. They are, of course, all second growths."

I don't know what makes me so anxious to sell this land to Matthew if he wants it. Perhaps when I see it I shall feel differently. It is partly because I want the money, and partly because it would be such a burden to me to take proper care of it, but it is far more because he wants it so much. There are so few things he cares for, that if he wants this land he shall have it, and he has wanted it all his life. To be able to make any one's dreams come true is a pleasure.

When I spoke of this excellent chance to Mr. Whiting he did not seem much more pleased than Matthew had been.

"I hoped I was going to be a kind of fairy

The First Step

godfather to you, Miss Moor," he said, "but Ripley has taken all the wind out of my sails. Don't let him have it for his price." (I had, of course, not mentioned the price.) "Be sure and charge him a good two hundred more than he offers. A clever, shrewd lawyer like Ripley would be sure to take advantage of a woman in a business transaction."

I was never so angry in my life. I should have liked to get up and forcibly eject him from the room. But having to live up to the character of a "perfect lady," I could only say, "You are not as generous to him as he is to you. He said you were a clever man and a good architect and I couldn't do better than to employ you."

"Did he say that? All the same he hates me."

"What makes you think so?"

"My dear lady, I have lived long enough in this world to realize that jealousy is always at the bottom of anything that would otherwise appear mysterious. It must be hard to have a stranger come to town and so easily slip into a footing of familiarity with all his friends. I like the fellow well enough. He is a good sort,

The First Step

but he is distinctly a country product. Take him to any of your large cities and he would be known at once for a hay-seed by the cut of his clothes, if nothing else, without mentioning his manners."

I do not know why this speech caused such rage to burn within me. It is nothing to me what clothes Matthew wears or what his manners are: but to have a light-weight person like Mr. Whiting, the acquaintance of a month's standing, undertake airily to sum up Matthew's qualities to me, who have known him all my life, made me choke with anger. If I had said all I thought, Mr. Whiting and I would have parted never to meet again.

I controlled myself, however, although I wondered that my mere silent protesting presence was not hostile enough to make him end his call. But it was not, and before the hour he spent with me was over, he was so thoughtful of my interests that I felt conscience-stricken for my anger. It ended in our having a more interesting talk than usual, for we discussed French art and found that we agreed perfectly, both in our enthusiasms and antipathies. We

The First Step

talked of Paris and quaint towns in France where I traveled with my mother in the golden days of my youth. Just to name them gives me a thrill! Amiens, Tours, Orléans, and never-to-be-forgotten Nîmes. He was abroad, too, the first summer that we were there. Suppose we had met then?

After all, with a woman whom he considers his friend, it is perhaps natural enough that he should give his opinion of Matthew Ripley. But to say that Matthew could take advantage of me or any woman in a business transaction is to misunderstand him completely. I have not known him ever since I was a shy awkward school-girl without realizing his endless kindness and patience with all who are weaker than himself. All those years that I never saw him or heard from him it was a rest to my mind to think of him; for I have never known any other man who was so absolutely honest and good, so honorable and trustworthy. That he is plain and awkward without any great polish is unfortunate for himself, as it has prevented his winning that kind of popularity which all men crave, but it is, in a way, what makes him a

The First Step

comfort to his friends. And I am not the only one who appreciates him. He is emphatically a man's man, however; women do not always understand him. His manners please me well enough, for he has the desire to help which comes from the heart. I have seen him walking along the street carrying a heavy bag for a poor old woman who was a stranger to him, and once I met him comforting a child who had upset a can of milk, by telling him he would go back to the store with him and pay for another can. Yes, the under dog and more especially the under cat, children, servants, old women at the Poor Farm, and I myself all unite to sing Matthew Ripley's praises.

Meanwhile Ernest Whiting considers him a shrewd man of business, and that little wretch of a niece of his thinks him "slow." I wonder if he is in love with her? She is no blood relation and such things have happened before now, to wise and sensible men. After all, the difference in age does not matter if there is deep affection, and he would be so wise with her, indulgent, but never beyond a certain point. If she loved him she would have a

The First Step

wonderfully happy life. There was a great deal of truth in what Mr. Whiting said concerning jealousy. If Matthew loves Cornelia, it is no wonder he cannot bear Ernest Whiting.

X

I HAD been looking forward all the week, as eagerly as a child, to Saturday afternoon, when Matthew was to drive me up North Mountain to view my property. The gypsy part of me longs to get away for a few hours from this house with its many problems. And to-day Cornelia ran in and spoiled it all.

"*Dear Miss Isabel,*" she said, and when she underscores the "dear" I'm sure that some pressing request is coming, "will you go canoeing with me to-morrow afternoon?"

"I can't, because your uncle is going to take me up to see my wood-lot, which he is thinking of buying."

"Ah ha! So that is Uncle Matthew's mysterious business engagement!"

"Did he say he had a business engagement? Then something must have turned up to prevent his going with me. He would n't have called that a business engagement." I felt hurt and greatly disappointed.

"If he has a business engagement, will you go

The First Step

canoeing? Do say 'yes.' I'm crazy to go, and mother won't let me go with Mr. Whiting unless I have a chaperon. She said I must take her along. You can see for yourself that would n't be any fun. Mother went with us once, and she sat up in the bow, and looked like a carved image at a ship's prow, and I chattered along whenever she gave me the chance, and after we got home she said, 'Cornelia, why did you say this? and what made you say that? Mr. Whiting will think that you have n't any brains.' So I said to mother, 'No, thank you, I'd rather go canoeing alone with Uncle Matthew than with you and Mr. Whiting.' Uncle Matthew, by the way, paddles as well as an Indian, and he does n't mind how much nonsense I talk. But when I invited him to go with me, he said he had a business engagement that he could n't break."

"If he does mean his engagement with me, I will let him off."

"Come to think of it he must have meant going with you, for he said he was going to drive the person to see some property. I thought it was a man. You need n't let him off, for I have

The First Step

a perfectly glorious plan. We'll all go, and we'll have a picnic at his shack. Every year Uncle Matthew takes me up there for the day. He has done it ever since I was a little girl. He usually takes mother, too, and he always takes Annie Kimball, and sometimes some of the other girls. He says it is horrid to have us all growing up, because we don't like simple pleasures any more. And he says he is afraid of young ladies. I'll suggest his taking the double wagon, and you can sit on the front seat with him, and Mr. Whiting can sit behind with me."

"You had better ask your mother to go instead of Mr. Whiting," I advised; "it seems to me that Mr. Whiting and your uncle do not especially take to each other."

"Have you noticed that too? Mr. Whiting likes Uncle Matthew, only of course he can't help seeing he is slow, but Uncle Matthew can't abide Mr. Whiting. He is frightfully jealous of any man that looks at me. He wants to keep me a little girl all my life. I used to adore him when I was small because he gave me such lovely dolls and took me to all the places

The First Step

mother would n't let me go to without an older person. Well, I'll ask mother, since you make a point of it."

Her eyes danced with happy anticipations of the afternoon.

I ought not to feel that my own pleasure in the prospect has gone. Three people will enjoy the arrangement a great deal better and this should be enough for me. Maria and Cornelia will have a charming time, and if Cornelia is there Matthew's "business engagement" will be turned into a party of pleasure.

But I was looking for an "afternoon out," so to speak, a time when I could really enjoy the peace and strength that come from the forest, and with that chattering Cornelia present, who will absorb all of her uncle's attention, my own pleasure will be diminished. . . .

I ought to have suspected by the way that child's eyes danced that some mischief was brewing, but nobody could have been more surprised than I was when Ernest Whiting joined us at the shack, having walked up the mountain. When he appeared Matthew looked at me with such a dark scowl that I was sure

The First Step

he thought I was in the secret of his coming. Matthew had been very silent on the drive, not even the gay Cornelia, who sat on the front seat, could draw forth anything but monosyllables from him. But now he looked positively forbidding, and when he and I left the others to walk into the adjacent wood which was my property he was in such a dumb mood that I was silenced.

Oh! the haunting beauty of that wood! I shall think of it again and again when I close my eyes to go to sleep. It was like some enchanted forest untouched by the world, sleeping until the princess should arrive to awaken it. I felt as if Cornelia, in the exuberance of her youth and high spirits, was a princess well calculated to put life into this scene of somber beauty. More than once a great tree lay prostrate across our path and the underbrush had grown up so that progress was often difficult. The sky was pale blue dappled with clouds, and every now and then the sunshine flecked our path. Matthew stalked on ahead of me, holding back the underbrush and discoursing of birches and maples and hemlocks.

The First Step

“When I tell you I would give you a thousand dollars for it,” said he, “you can see for yourself it would be worth a great deal more than that to any one who wanted to buy it for the timber and clear it all off, but I want to buy it to preserve it. I hate to see a fine wood like this going to rack and ruin for the want of a little care. You could get all your firewood off it and make a good deal of money merely by clearing out the dead trees and those that crowd the others, as I shall do if you sell it to me.”

“It would be a great responsibility for me,” I said. “And yet I like the idea of owning land where the gypsy part of me can go and feel satisfied.”

“Is there a gypsy part of you? I had n’t suspected that. If there is, you had better hold on to this wood, for you will find nothing like it in the market. I come up here for a day or two, whenever I can, sometimes alone, often with one or two other men. I have got all my own wood in shape with paths made, and it would be a great interest to begin on yours. Don’t decide in a hurry, take plenty of time to

The First Step

think it over; only don't sell it without letting me know of any offer you may have."

My wood did not skirt the edge of the lake like Matthew's, but he showed me how a vista could be cut which would give a distant view of it.

To him it was a wood, full of trees of money value, while to me it was a bit straight from fairy land. And yet I could not but suspect that there was more sentiment connected with it than he cared to show, for Cornelia must have walked there with him many times.

Maria was cooking the supper in the shack when we returned, getting what inefficient help she could from Cornelia and Mr. Whiting, and a little later we had a cheerful meal. Mr. Whiting was not depressed by Matthew's lack of cordiality, but was the life of the occasion.

After supper Matthew took Cornelia out in his canoe, while Mr. Whiting talked to Maria and me as we washed the dishes and made the shack tidy. Maria called her brother and his young charge long before they were ready to come back to shore. They landed at last with evident reluctance.

The First Step

"Matthew, we ought to be starting for home," Maria said. "I hate driving over these roads after dark."

"There's a moon, mother," said Cornelia.

"Yes, but it rises very late."

Cornelia, in a short, green skirt, hatless and with her hair disheveled, in her vigorous physical strength, looked like some dryad who belonged to an earlier world.

Suddenly, with a backward glance at Mr. Whiting, she started to run down the mountain road with the fleetness of a deer.

"Cornelia!" her mother called after her.

"I'm not going to ride; I'm going to walk home by the short cut," she called back. "Does any one want to come with me?" and she began to sing "The Gypsy Trail."

Matthew rose hastily, but Mr. Whiting, who was nearer, had already started to follow her.

"Matthew, go along with them," Maria commanded.

"Not much," he said. "I'm not going to butt in again."

"Then I shall go," said Maria. She was very light and as fleet of foot as a girl. She could

The First Step

in fact run faster than the heavier Cornelia. "Come round to my house for chocolate and cake," she called back to us, and she said peremptorily to Cornelia, "Wait for me. I feel exactly like a scramble, too."

Matthew and I looked at each other blankly for a moment, then he laughed a little ruefully. "What a child she is," he said; "I hope Maria is n't too strict with her. I am sorry I did n't get the first start, so that you could have had some sort of a good time with your guest."

"My guest? Oh, did you think I was so rude as to invite Mr. Whiting to come on an expedition that was planned by you?"

"Why, yes. I thought Cornelia said you suggested the picnic."

"I did n't suggest Mr. Whiting. I was as much surprised as you were when he turned up. I don't think you need worry about their — their friendship" (I longed to say flirtation), "for I think neither of them is seriously interested in the other."

This speech put him in such good spirits that the rest of our stay was a pleasure.

The First Step

I have seen many sunsets, having acquired a taste for them at an early age, but I never saw one that seemed so like the heart of out of doors. The red ball sinking into a sea of gray flecks tipped with fire was like the center of the universe toward which all life converged. I felt like a gypsy cut loose from my past, and longing to follow the gypsy trail to the edge of the world. But I had never found the Romany patteran, and should I find it I was a solitary gypsy who would have to walk in it alone. The gypsy trail never takes account of spinster gypsies of thirty-four. The song kept ringing in my ears.

“Follow the Romany patteran,
West to the sinking sun,”

and again:—

“The wild hawk to the wind-swept sky,
The deer to the wholesome wold,
And the heart of a man to the heart of a maid,
As it was in the days of old.”

What a pity that 'it was n't the real thing with those two who had gone over the brow of the hill!

The First Step

"The heart of a man to the heart of a maid,
Light of my tents, be fleet!
Morning waits at the end of the world,
And the world is all at our feet!"

But unless I have wholly misread him, Mr. Whiting, in spite of his appreciation of poetry, is firmly addicted to the comforts of this world; while Matthew, who is less dependent on them than most people, I instinctively felt would have no sympathy with my fancies, so we talked of everyday things as he drove me down the mountain. When he left me at Maria's house, hot chocolate and cake might be a come down after the heights I had been living on, but they were very welcome, especially as Maria's food is always better than other people's!

I could not understand why Mr. Whiting was so out of spirits; something had evidently gone wrong. I wondered if it could be possible that he had begun to be seriously interested in Cornelia and resented her mother's interference.

Under cover of Cornelia's singing (he had suggested that she should sing "The Gypsy Trail") he came over and sat down by me.

The First Step

"I can hardly flatter myself that you had as disappointing an afternoon as I had," he said in a low voice.

"I thought it was one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen," I said non-committally.

"Oh, the place was all right."

"Did you ever know such delicious hot chocolate?" I observed.

"I was n't thinking about the chocolate."

"No, I don't suppose you need to" (he had had two cups), "but I am still very hungry."

"You are the most cold-hearted person."

"I suppose I must be," said I, "for I have been told so before."

Maria had gone into the kitchen and Cornelia was singing too vigorously to overhear him.

"What a hideous room," he said under his breath. "How could any one put on a chocolate wall-paper, with such ugly gilt figures, and combine it with white paint and curtains that are so Philistine?"

"I like this room," I said. "I would give a great deal if my house could be run with such clock-like precision as Mrs. Blake's, and if I

The First Step

could make such chocolate as this on my cook's evening out."

"Both to the road again, again," sang Cornelia in her rich voice.

"That music is enough to make me want to stop altering my house, and start for Europe next week," I said.

"I don't feel so at all," said he; "I have roved quite enough in my life. My one dream now is to settle down."

It was so firmly impressed on my mind that Mr. Whiting was merely amusing himself with all of us that this remark made no especial impression on me; indeed, I fell to wondering what he would say to Maria about my house. Probably, "What a pity she lives so much in her parlor and leaves so many papers on her desk. And did you notice the dust on the mantelpiece the other day?" No, it would be a pity if we did not gain some advantage from our increasing years. They, at least, make us experienced in reading character.

XI

OH, dear, I have got my house affairs into the most awful muddle. It never once occurred to me, when I told Mr. Whiting that he might go ahead with the dining-room window and the sleeping-porch, that he and Mr. Emmons would not hit it off. I have been through such a scene! I did not suppose a mild, elderly man, with as good manners as Mr. Emmons has, had such a fiery temper. I think, before his hair turned gray, it must have been as red as mine. This morning he came into my work-room and said haughtily, "Miss Moor, in what way have I failed to please you?"

"In no way, Mr. Emmons," I said, looking up in surprise. "Everything you have done has been most satisfactory."

"Then, why do you have an architect when I could put in a simple window without that fool plan?"

"Mr. Whiting was so kind as to say he would oversee the work for me. I never dreamed you would n't like to work for him. I am sure it will be much easier than to work for me."

The First Step

"He has been getting estimates," said Mr. Emmons gloomily, "and that cheat of a Farrell has made a very low bid."

"If that is all, I'll make it right with Mr. Whiting, and tell him he must have you to do the work. It never once occurred to me he would have any one else."

"I'm not so short of a job that I have to work for him," said Mr. Emmons. "And I ain't one to speak against my neighbors, only we all know what Farrell is. Ask Mrs. Blake. I'll be sorry to see poor timber go into this fine old house, Miss Moor; and as for going with you to look at glass shelves and cupboards for your bathroom, as I promised to do, no doubt Mr. Whiting will be pleased to buy those for you in New York. Good-afternoon, Miss Moor. I'll be glad to work for yourself, any time, but I don't care to work for any New York architect with his damned airs. I beg your pardon, Miss Moor; I forgot I was talking to a lady."

"Please, Mr. Emmons," I entreated, actually running out of the door after him, "don't desert me. ~~Here~~ comes Mr. Whiting now."

I tried to put on a brave front, but my heart,

The First Step

had my pulse been taken just then, would have warranted any doctor in thinking I had some fatal disease.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Whiting," I said with conventional politeness (it was a down-right lie). "I was just saying to Mr. Emmons that of course I expected him to finish my work."

"I understood that you put it entirely into my hands," said Mr. Whiting. "That is what most people have an architect for. Mr. Emmons has made a much higher estimate than any of the other carpenters, but of course if you choose to have him it is nothing to me. Fortunately, I have not given my decision."

Betty, meanwhile, was ostentatiously sweeping off the piazza as we stood talking on the brick path. Any sort of a quarrel is the spice of life to her.

"I want to please every one," I said, "and it is n't that I am doubting your judgment, Mr. Whiting, but you can see for yourself that when a man has done such a good job it would n't be fair for me to turn him off."

"I don't care about a little job like that,"

The First Step

said Mr. Emmons. "Mr. Whiting can have every carpenter in town for all of me."

He touched his hat to me and walked away with dignity.

"He's sour on me because he did n't get work on the Episcopal church," said Mr. Whiting, "but in that case, too, his bid was the highest. I know him root and branch, for he worked on the Bradford house for me."

"He is so honest and such a good workman," said I.

"Oh, he's honest to the point of bending backward."

"Please, if you can, I'd like you to make it up with him," I said.

"As you like. Are you sorry you did n't choose your plumber without my assistance?" he asked in his most courteous tones.

I could n't help laughing. "No," I said, "I like your choice of a plumber."

The laugh made us good friends at once. "Indeed, I am really and truly most grateful to you, Mr. Whiting," said I. We walked into the house together and had a little conference about the work.

The First Step

When he left me he pressed my hand warmly. "Miss Moor, I like you all the better for standing up for any one who has served you well," he said, in his musical voice that would have made the unwary think he had a peculiar interest in his interlocutor. "I'll make it up with Emmons, if you say so. After all, it's only a matter of forty dollars."

"Forty dollars!" I gasped. "That is a big difference!"

"So I thought," he said dryly, "but those who are fortunate enough to have the money can afford to indulge their generous fancies. I understood you felt a little — er — cramped; you gave me that idea, and I was trying my best to get the work done reasonably."

"I suppose you will think me very unreasonable," I said, "but having gone so far with Mr. Emmons, I can't draw back."

XII

I SHOULD not have believed I could enjoy being away from my own house so much. I am beginning to think that it is only when she visits that the lonely spinster truly has a home. My house finally got into such a mess, what with the ripping-out of all the old plumbing and the tearing-down the wall of the dining-room that I was forced to accept some of the pressing invitations given me by my kind neighbors. I did not dare to leave town for fear Mr. Whiting and Mr. Emmons might have some fatal disagreement. I have wished twenty times that I had not employed an architect, and twenty times more that, having acquired one, I had let him choose his own men. It seems as if there were a controversy about every nail and piece of wood that is going into that house.

But the visits are a continual delight. First I went to Maria for a fortnight, and how I did enjoy her stimulating companionship! She is very agreeable in her own house, where she finds nothing to improve. I lived on the fat of the

The First Step

land in two senses, for I had a feast of Cornelia's singing; and then I went to the Kimballs' for a week, where Annie and I read together, and I grew more and more fond of the quiet girl, with her rich fancy and her humdrum life; and now I am making Mrs. Ripley a visit. She says I must stay until my house is in order, but Maria is begging for another fortnight. I think the reason they all like to have me as a visitor is because I have to be at my own house so much of the time that my hosts do not get tired of me.

One week later.

I am continually making statements in this record which I have to retract. I am already longing for the peaceful shelter of my own roof, and I do not now feel as if Maria might have lived with her mother. She showed her usual good sense by keeping out of it. I shall end by adoring Maria as much as I did when I was seventeen. Fascinating as Mrs. Ripley is when one spends an hour with her, I have never known any one so difficult to live with. Matthew never crosses the threshold that she does not send

The First Step

him on some errand, and he must never be one moment late to his meals. Of course I cannot breathe my feelings to any one, but this book is my safety-valve. I have plenty of time to write in it, for at nine o'clock, when Mrs. Ripley goes to bed, I go up to my room. I suppose Matthew slips over to Maria's as usual. He only missed three evenings during the fortnight that I was there. Mr. Whiting, too, called almost every night. Matthew has an early breakfast, and I have mine later, which Mrs. Ripley thinks adds to the comfort of both of us. I have no doubt it does add to his. I had the feeling both at Maria's and Annie's that I could really contribute to their pleasure just by being my own natural self, but here I cannot call my soul my own. I can't even venture to suggest reading to Mrs. Ripley, or writing for her, or playing chess; I must wait for the word to come from her. She must be left to rule absolutely. The only way I managed to pick and arrange the flowers was by an amount of tact and strategy that made me feel I could easily become a politician if women could vote. As Mrs. Ripley's own especial maid is away, there was no one

The First Step

on whom the duty devolved, and the flowers were crying out to be picked. They never have them on the dining-table, but an old-fashioned, round castor stands stiffly in the middle of the white tablecloth. I can, however, put a bowl of nasturtiums or sweet peas on the side table, and Mrs. Ripley likes them in her room and in the parlor. How I do dislike being in a house where the interests are only in trifles! It is a crime for Matthew to put a chair in any place but its own, and if I casually leave the paper in any but its accustomed home, it is a high misdemeanor. I say to myself Mrs. Ripley is an invalid and an old woman and that I am a most uncharitable young woman. I feel very young when with her, hardly grown up, and I try to be glad that she likes to have me read to her and write for her at hours that are exceedingly inconvenient to myself. I am almost as useful to her as her maid, but I am going back to my wrecked house as soon as I can decently make an excuse.

This morning I woke up early and by seven o'clock I was dressed and out in the garden cut-

The First Step

ting flowers. I was stooping down picking the dwarf nasturtiums in the border around one of the flower-beds and feeling completely made over by the intoxication of the sunshine, joined to the bracing morning air, when I heard a step behind me, and looking over my shoulder I saw Matthew.

"Isabel," said he, "it was only last night I found out it was you who picked the flowers. It is too much for you to do, in addition to taking care of your own garden. I come out here and weed every morning and I will cut the flowers for you. I like the way you have them all around the house," he added, a little shyly, for paying compliments is not in his line.

He stooped down and began to pick the nasturtiums on the other side of the bed.

"Don't you wish you were not so tall on these occasions?" I asked. "When I am gardening I always wish I were the size of Maria."

There came a sharp tap on the window.

"Your mother wants something," I said.

Matthew waved his hand to her and went on picking nasturtiums. Presently there came a second rap, louder than the first.

The First Step

"I'll go in to her," said I, for I had all the flowers I really needed. But it was provoking, for I was enjoying myself very much.

I had a huge bunch of nasturtiums in my hand as I knocked at her door.

"Isabel, I want a little help about fastening my dress," she said. "My dear, you look positively lovely this morning with your hair shading in with those brown and orange nasturtiums. Give me a kiss, you radiant young thing!"

If one likes a person at all, one's heart is always softened by the giving of a kiss. I was consumed with pity for the delicate old woman who had been a beauty and a belle in her youth.

"It is nice to be with some one who thinks me young," said I, "for Cornelia always makes me feel middle-aged."

"For all practical purposes you are as young as Cornelia, and a great deal more interesting."

"Shall I go down and have breakfast with Matthew?" I asked a little later. "Would n't it save trouble as long as I am ready?"

"No, my dear, Matthew is a creature of habit, as I am myself."

The First Step

I therefore waited until my usual breakfast-hour, only to find that he came in late. So we breakfasted together. For a person who is a creature of habit, he rose bravely to the occasion.

XIII

It does not seem possible that my house is really ready to be lived in again. Every one is urging me to have a house-warming, but Betty and I are not anxious to have one. Now that the house improvements are an accomplished fact the dear old soul is almost prouder of them than I am. One would think the original idea had been hers.

I slept out on the porch for the first time night before last. It was wonderfully beautiful, for the moon shone down on me for hours. There was also a glorious sunrise. I should n't mind the mosquitoes if I were deaf or they were dumb.

The next night I was driven in by an unexpected thunder-shower, dragging my bedding after me, and so I have decided to have the porch roofed over and wire screens at the sides and curtains at the east end. This is nuts to Mr. Whiting and also to Maria.

I should n't mind being kept awake could I summon pleasant thoughts as my companions,

The First Step

but I find these quiet hours a fatal time to pursue the study of mental arithmetic. For instance, how am I to pay Mr. Whiting and his men? Something must be sold in addition to the wood-lot, and is it wiser to sell an excellent telephone stock that brings in eight per cent, or a railroad stock that is down on its luck and pays nothing? Yet it is so low that it seems a disastrous time to sell it.

It is a comfort not to be at Mrs. Ripley's beck and call, but mealtimes are very solitary, for Matthew waked up so during the last half of my visit that dinner and supper became a free lecture for his mother and me. He told us many noteworthy facts about the political machinery of a small town. He was also most interesting in regard to national politics, and the affairs going on in foreign countries. It is astonishing how much general information he has. And yet I never feel stupid when I am with him; he stimulates me. Mrs. Ripley would listen to our arguments and egg us on.

It is over now, and Matthew, being a very busy person by day, and not addicted to a sleeping-porch by night, has no time to miss me.

The First Step

He has not been to call on me since my return, being a creature of habit. Mr. Whiting comes every day, for the house is not quite finished. He is anxious to have my house-warming take the form of a reception, while Mrs. Ripley has begged me to let her come to a quiet lunch, and Cornelia wants me to give a dance. Maria has asked me to have the next meeting of the Garden Club. Matthew alone has demanded nothing.

Maria came in to-day, and she is most enthusiastic over the house. "You had better not give a large reception, Isabel," she remarked. "If you do you will have an offer of marriage from every ineligible man in town."

"Hardly," I said dryly, "for he would have to take me as well as the house."

How I do hate jokes on that subject! Whereupon, to my great surprise, Maria began to talk about my improved looks. She declared that my being so much in the open air had done wonders for my complexion. "You look at least five years younger than you did when you came, Isabel. Mother was speaking of it the other day. Oh, by the way, don't forget you have

The First Step

promised to ask mother to lunch some day; she has set her heart on it. I am sure it would not hurt her if she drove. She could lunch quietly with just Cornelia and me."

I have had Mrs. Ripley to lunch and lived through it. Maria and Cornelia came in the carriage with her, and Mrs. Ripley entered the house with her ebony cane in one hand, and the other slipped through Maria's arm, while Cornelia, the lady in waiting, brought up the rear with extra wraps and Mrs. Ripley's especial sofa-cushion that just fits into her back.

Oddly enough Mr. Whiting was with me when the royal cortège entered; he had come to explain why the blinds have not yet arrived.

"My dear lady," he said, going forward in his most impressive manner, "what a surprise this is! Allow me, Mrs. Blake," and he gallantly offered his arm to Mrs. Ripley. "Where is she to sit, Miss Moor?"

"I think she will like that armchair over by the fire."

The fire was an especial concession to Mrs. Ripley's feebleness.

The First Step

"She says she does not care to sit in that armchair," he called back to me.

"Very well, she can sit where she likes."

"I did not know there were to be gentlemen at this luncheon," said Mrs. Ripley, as she sank into a corner of the sofa. "Give me a fan, please; that fire makes the room so warm. You have n't a fan? Never mind, a newspaper will do just as well."

I explained that Mr. Whiting's presence was an accident.

"Don't you think she ought to let me stay, Mrs. Ripley?" he begged plaintively. "I assure you I can be most ladylike on occasion. Miss Moor can hardly be more interested in this house than I am. I should so like to show you all the little improvements that I have suggested. Miss Moor is silent. She is a very candid and truthful young woman and I can see by her face that for some reason she does n't want me to stay. Won't you intercede for me, Mrs. Ripley?"

Mrs. Ripley had not been a beauty and a favorite in her youth for nothing. Her spirit rose to match his. "Miss Moor, I am certain,

The First Step

thinks so large a party will tire me," she said, graciously, "but I can assure you it will give me great pleasure to have you stay."

I hastily escaped to the kitchen to devise a method by which four cups of cream of chicken soup with mushrooms could be made into five, and four little dishes of fish stretched in a similar way. There was no possibility of enlarging four quail, but a slice of cold lamb on toast for myself was not a bad substitute, and I could have a plate of salad made out of wisps of left-over things; fortunately there was plenty of ice-cream and cake.

I hope nobody noticed what I was eating except Maria; I saw her sharp eyes fixed on my plate more than once. Poor Betty! I am glad she is fond of bread and butter.

One would have thought that Mr. Whiting was Mrs. Ripley's long-lost nephew, by the cordial way in which she treated him. He was, as he always is, on the occasions where he has not been invited, the life of the company. And afterwards, as he took Mrs. Ripley on his arm around the house, and showed her one contriv-

The First Step

ance after another, one would have thought it was his house, not mine.

The sleeping-porch took her fancy, and she and Mr. Whiting decided that I must have it glassed in for winter.

"That is what I have been telling Miss Moor," he said. "It would make a perfect sun-parlor."

"But I don't want a sun-parlor," I said with some asperity.

I am sure they all enjoyed the afternoon. Mrs. Ripley had a nap on the sofa in my room while the rest of us sat in the garden and chattered; and Matthew drove around for his mother at the end of the afternoon. He looked most forbidding when he caught sight of Mr. Whiting, who, on purpose to tease him, began to recount the bill of fare at lunch. "It was a pity you could n't get off," he said.

"I was n't asked," said Matthew, in his most frigid manner.

"I was n't either," said Mr. Whiting suavely, "but I did n't let a little thing like that keep me away."

XIV

It seems months since the lunch-party, and it is only a week. Now that I am with Mary Lansing on the Massachusetts seacoast, those last days at home seem like an incredible dream. I am going back to record everything just as it happened, to see if I can understand things any better when I have the facts all before me in black and white.

I could not bear to see Matthew so unhappy and hurt, so, while the others were helping his mother into her wraps, I took him into the dining-room to show him the alterations.

"Why have n't you been to see me since I came back?" I asked.

"You did n't seem to be in need of company."

"I was in need of yours."

"I told you to send for me if you wanted me for anything."

"Do you think I send for people when I want them? I don't have to do that."

I glanced through the open door at Mr. Whiting.

The First Step

"It seems you don't," said he, and we both laughed.

I felt so happy and so full of life and joy that it must have been contagious, for Matthew became positively frivolous.

"Children, children, what are you laughing about?" Mrs. Ripley asked presently. "I'm ready to go home, Matthew."

Before they left he promised to look in on me some day, to help me decide which investment I ought to sell.

I was sitting on the piazza the next evening in the twilight, straining my eyes over a novel, when the gate clicked and I heard Matthew's step on the walk. I went on reading.

He came over and stood behind me. Still I did not look up. Presently I felt a hand seize my book and draw it away.

"Isabel, you'll ruin your eyes," he said.

"I think I am the best judge of that," I answered. "It is very interesting. I want to finish this chapter. And how do you happen to be coming here at this unusual time? Why are n't you playing chess with your mother?"

"Because I had this important business en-

The First Step

gagement. I always put business ahead of pleasure."

"In that case we'll go right into the house and I'll get out my certificates."

"You need n't be in such a hurry. Mr. Whiting is amusing my mother a great deal better than I can."

"That is lucky," said I, "for you can amuse me a great deal better than he can."

As we sat looking into the garden I confided all my small trials to him.

"I wish I knew how to keep boys away from fruit trees!" I said. "It was bad enough when the raspberries and currants were ripe, but they were nearer the house. Betty waddles down into the garden, but she is so little they just laugh at her; and when I stalk down they are most polite and ask if they can have a few crab-apples, and the first thing I know the tree is stripped."

"You are much too gentle," said Matthew.

Yes, he actually said that, but he will never say it again.

After a time we went into the house. He seemed reluctant about it, but I was anxious to get his advice. We had been looking over the

The First Step

certificates and he reproached me for not keeping them in a box in the safety vaults. (I had unguardedly confided to him that I kept them in a bureau drawer.)

"Locked, I hope?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you keep bonds there, too?"

"I have n't any bonds. I could n't bother with them. I was always forgetting the time to cut off the coupons."

"You just said you could n't remember when your dividends were due."

"Why should I? I have much more interesting things to think about. And they just come along through the mail."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, I'm glad you know the worst," I said, "even if you despise me from this time forth and forever more."

Suddenly he fixed on me a glance so warm and so penetrating that I began to grow hot and cold. I had never seen him look at any one, not even at Cornelia, like that.

He had one hand on the certificate of the misbehaving railroad stock,—he had shortly before

The First Step

been expressing himself in forcible language concerning my St. Louis business adviser, —but the other hand lay near me on the table. I remember thinking how firm it looked and how lean and brown. My own, which was near it holding the certificate of a mining-stock, seemed limp and ineffective in comparison. Suddenly he grasped my hand so firmly that I felt a queer, tingling sensation running up to my elbow.

“Isabel,” he said, in a strange, hoarse voice, “you had better marry me. You need a man as much as I need a woman.”

For one moment it was as if the walls of that room had given way and I was looking forth into a primeval world. I had a longing to escape, yet a still stronger impulse kept me rooted to the spot.

“Don’t,” I said, drawing my hand away. “You hurt me.”

And still he kept looking at me and I began to tremble all over. I was afraid and yet fascinated.

“Isabel,” he repeated, “will you marry me?”

“I can’t,” I said. “I don’t want to marry any one.”

The First Step

His face changed so at this that I felt I had hurt him cruelly. To soften the effect of my words I added, "It could n't have been, anyway, your mother —"

"Oh, is that it?" and his face lighted up. "My mother would like it, she said —"

So they had been talking it over together! A sudden gust of anger kindled something in me which burned like a flame. I was keenly mortified, too, for at the moment I felt that I must have imagined the strength of his feeling for me. I had a sickening idea that my wretched house was at the bottom of it, for I remembered Maria's words about possible offers from ineligible men.

"I suppose your mother would like living in my house," I flashed out.

He was silent, and I began to think this was true.

"Was this her plan that you should ask me to marry you?" I inquired icily. I don't know how I could have been so rude.

Again he was silent, and once more I had the unspeakable mortification of thinking that this also was a fact.

The First Step

"I have lived alone too long to want to marry any one," I said, "and nothing would ever induce me to live in the same house with any man's mother; so now you know the truth."

"My wife would have to live with my mother," he said slowly, as if he had been thinking out a problem.

"Yes, I know that. I hope she will be very happy."

I was so hurt and angry that I did not care what I said.

"Isabel!" he cried, as if I had struck him a blow. "I thought you liked my mother."

"I do, but nothing would ever induce me to live with any man's mother," I repeated, "and I don't want to marry any one."

He got up wearily without bidding me good-night. It was not until he had reached the door that I began to relent. It came over me then that I was doing my best to put an end to a friendship that meant more to me than I had owned, even to myself. I had destroyed his ideal of me.

"I like you so much for a neighbor," I said.

The First Step

"I should think you would. I am very useful when you want advice."

Then, without another word, he left the room.

I don't know how I got through the next day. It seemed interminable. I kept thinking Matthew would come back and give me advice about my business affairs just as if nothing had happened. But he did not come. No one called, except the man to put up the blinds. I longed to go to see Maria, but pride forbade. I took a long walk by myself, thinking how happy I should be if I might come across Matthew somewhere and make up our quarrel. It seemed so unreasonable of fate, not to allow us to be friends, simply because I did not want to marry him. Late in the evening, just as I was finishing my novel, a dreary affair which turned out disastrously, for the heroine married the wrong man, I heard a sharp ring at the door. Betty had gone to bed. It was too late for an ordinary caller, but I had a strong conviction that Matthew had stopped on his way home from Maria's to take charge of my certificates, and the thought of seeing him brought a rush of fear and joy. I tremblingly opened the door.

The First Step

A boy stood there with a telegram in his hand. He blinked sleepily as the light struck his face.

I tore the envelope open and found a long telegram from Mary Lansing, saying that her father had died suddenly and that the funeral was to take place on Thursday. Her husband had been expecting to sail for England on Saturday where he was to give an address at an important scientific convention, but he would have to give it up if I could not come to her. Did I mean what I had said in my letter? — that I would come to her, whenever she needed me? And if so, could I take the five o'clock train the next morning?

I never knew before how dear my life was to me in this quiet New England town, which is more like home to me than anything I have known since I left it fourteen years ago. But there was nothing else to be done but to keep my promise, so I scribbled a message and sent it back by the boy. "Will come to-morrow."

And I came.

XV

BEING with Mary Lansing in the presence of death has made the petty details of the last month slip away into oblivion, but, on the other hand, that scene with Matthew seems etched into my memory. Before this I have only known the inconsolable pang of missing the dead, but at least they are one's own for all time.

Fortunately I have occupation, for there are two strenuous little boys to be taken out on the rocks while their mother tries to get her afternoon rest, and a small girl to win over, who for some perverse reason does not approve of me. I should n't think she would, for I do not approve of myself. How could I have managed so badly as to make Matthew feel that I was so devoted to his mother that it would be the joy of my life to take care of her through her declining years? I have tried to make every one like me, it is true, from the carpenters and plumbers up through the social circle to Mrs.

The First Step

Ripley at the top. But is this a crime? And then I have spoiled everything: I have not been able to prevent the architect and the carpenter from having one long feud, and I have sent Matthew off in such anger that he will never want to see me again. These things do not happen to Maria. She never loses a friend.

While Mary is reading to the children I come out by myself and sit on the rocks and look far away to that distant country which they tell me is Spain. I wonder if there are people who find in life the stuff of which their dreams are made?

I have had another painful surprise. Mary and I were sitting on the piazza with the small Milly when Mr. Whiting walked up to us. He looked so cheerful and *débonnaire* that my spirits rose. In two minutes Milly was sitting in his lap, she who will never come to me, and he was talking to Mary Lansing as if he were an old friend. They had never met before, but he had once seen her father.

"How do you happen to be in this part of the world?" I asked.

The First Step

"I have come down to see about the building of a house."

"Where is it to be?" said Mary. "I do hope it is n't near us. I can't bear to have our view interfered with."

"No, it is farther back, higher up."

"Is it indiscreet for me to ask who is building it?" Mary inquired.

"I am not at liberty to tell you," he said, fixing his eyes on her as if she were the one woman who had ever completely charmed him. Her beauty and look of fragile dependence, in her deep mourning, rouse the chivalry of every man. Dear Mary, we all adore her!

Mr. Whiting said he would like to take me to see the situation of the house, as he wanted to ask my advice about some of its details, and I walked off with him unsuspectingly. I was surprised to find him taking the narrow path that led to the rocks.

"I thought you told us the house was to be higher up," I said.

"So it is, Miss Moor, it is a castle in the air."

"You mean there is n't any house?"

The First Step

"Not here."

So he had come to see me! I felt that he must be very anxious about the final payment on my house to have taken so extreme a step.

"I am so sorry about those last bills," I said apologetically. "I do hope you did n't think I was one of those dreadful people who don't pay their bills," I added jestingly, "slipping away as I did at five o'clock in the morning. I ought to have written to you, but everything is so tangled up I shall have to ask you to wait for a while."

He let me talk on and explain until we reached the edge of the sea, and there he found a comfortable seat for me on the rocks, and stretched himself out by my side.

"Wonderful place, this," he said, "with the whole Atlantic Ocean pounding in at one's feet. How glorious it must be in a storm," and he began to quote from the "Gypsy Trail" —

"Morning waits at the end of the world
Where winds unshattered play,
Nipping the flanks of their plunging ranks,
Till the white sea-horses neigh.

The First Step

"Follow the Romany patteran
Sheer to the Austral Light,
Where the besom of God is the wild
west wind
Sweeping the sea-floors white."

"Is n't Mrs. Lansing charming?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered a little absently. "I did n't notice her especially."

"You had the manner of never having seen any one so adorable," I reproved him. "You could n't help noticing the wonderful blue of her eyes and the gold brown of her hair and her half wistful, wholly lovable expression."

"I was absorbed in noticing those things in some one else."

"If you mean me, my eyes are gray-green and my hair is red," I said uncompromisingly.

"Miss Moor, I am tired of this." And without any further warning he began to make love to me, serious love, and I am bound to say he did it most artistically. I don't know why I felt as if it were not real. All the time I kept thinking it was my house he had fallen in love with, not me.

The First Step

"My feeling for you dates back to the time when I first saw you come out of that misty green house door," he said finally. "I was as sure then that you were the one woman in the world for me as I am now. If I had not been so conventional I should have asked you to marry me that night at the dance. What are you thinking about?" he broke off to ask.

I was thinking how many women he must have been in love with, and how little I could trust in the permanence of his feeling for me; but I could hardly say this to him. Instead, I told him how his manner seemed so lover-like to all women that I had never dreamed he was in earnest.

"I don't deserve that from you," he said. "If one judged by manner, how would you come off? I thought we understood each other."

He went on to describe his wandering life, and the longing he had to settle down and have a real home, and how impossible it had been until he met me to find a good woman who was interesting and congenial, one with whom he would like to spend his whole life.

Finally he said, with boyish eagerness, "Re-

The First Step

member, Miss Moor, that you told me yourself it was always your impulse to say 'yes.'"

I looked out at the expanse of the gray Atlantic, breaking into misty foam on the rocks at our feet, and I told him as gently as I could that I knew I could never love him well enough to marry him; and again I could not make it seem real. It was incredible that this man, whom I had considered incapable of serious feeling, should have chosen me of all women as a suitable companion for his whole life.

"You would get tired of me in a few months," I told him. "What you need is a younger woman, bright and fresh like Cornelia."

"Cornelia! She and I would be divorced before the year was out. Oh, don't you see I have had enough of playing with love; even before I saw you I longed to make a home for myself."

He went on to describe the ideal life we could lead, in New York for three months in the winter and the rest of the time living a simple life in the country in my house, our house, for he had put so much thought into it that he felt almost as if it were already his.

The First Step

"It is my house, Mr. Whiting," I said firmly. "I seem to be one of those women bound to live alone by the law of my nature."

"Was it on account of his mother that you refused Matthew Ripley?"

I felt the color surging into my cheeks, and instead of being cold and hard, I was once more shaken with feeling.

"How did you know —" I began.

"I did n't, but I am good at guessing."

"That was n't fair," I said indignantly.

"All is fair in love and war. You were right in refusing to live with Mrs. Ripley; she's an old cat. A man can get a good deal of amusement out of her; if Matthew brought her flowers occasionally, — a single rose would do, — and a box of chocolates from time to time; and if he told her at least three times a day how wonderfully she had kept her good looks, he could do as he pleased the rest of the twenty-four hours and she would adore him, whereas he often bores her now."

"Would you have given no more than that to your mother?" I asked.

"If my mother had lived I should have been

The First Step

a different man," he said, in a tone of real feeling. "However, from your point of view," he added lightly, "that is one of my assets. I am unhampered either by father, mother, brother, or sister. You would have no 'in-laws,' whereas Mrs. Ripley would drive any woman to drink."

Now that it is all over and he has gone away, I keep thinking of the irony of fate. There he sat in the strength of his youth, pleasant to the eye, and most satisfying to the ear; eager, pleading, and for once in earnest, all that I could have ever asked for in my dreams when I was a girl. We have the same tastes, the same books please us, the same pictures, the same way of life, and nothing he says or does moves me or excites me. I saw him leave without regret; while Matthew, plain, awkward, unskillful at love-making, Matthew who cares for neither poetry nor art, the mere thought of Matthew sets the blood pulsing quicker through my veins. I do not want to marry him, — even if it were not for his mother I should not want to marry him; I have been independent too long, — but

The First Step

if I were his sister how passionately grateful I should be to fate. Just to be able to see him familiarly every day, to hear his voice, to have his constant, tender interest in me and all my affairs! When nature made me so suited to adorn the rôle of sister, it was most wasteful of her to make me an only child!

And not one word have I heard from him for ten days!

I honestly thought I was old enough to escape all sentimental entanglements. Certainly I should have been very vain if I had expected men to fall in love with me, at my age. Why, it is eight years at least since any one has wanted to marry me. Oh! I forgot that tiresome man at the boarding-house in St. Louis, but he was such a bore he does n't count. I am sure my house has played a large part in the drama. A sunny, tasteful house, in thorough repair, is, it seems, almost as irresistible an attraction as beauty or wealth. Speaking of money, my small fortune is sadly dwindling.

I shall have to do something, for Mr. Whiting must be paid at once. The longer I delay, the more color I give to his last speech. "Remember,

The First Step

Isabel," he said, "that all I have is yours. Don't mind about paying those bills. I am sure you will feel differently about me when you think it over. And if we begin our life together soon, what difference does it make whether they are paid by me or by you?"

"It can never be," I said firmly.

XVI

Yes, something must be done. And as Matthew is not going to take the initiative, I must write and remind him that I am willing to sell the wood-lot, and I must ask him to get Betty to go to that bureau drawer, locked at present, and hand over those certificates to him to put in his box in the safety vaults until I get home. I shall also have to ask him to sell whichever stock he thinks best; for, as far as I can make out, I am now owing one thousand, six hundred and forty-one dollars and eighty-nine cents. If I were a carpenter I would tack on eleven cents somehow and make an even thing of it.

“Don’t mind about paying those bills,” said Mr. Whiting.

I will pay them before the week is out, if I have to sell the clothes off my back. By the way, they would bring at a bargain sale about seventeen dollars and ninety-eight cents.

There is one pleasing fact I forgot to record, and that is that Mr. Whiting took two of my flower pictures on to New York, and placed

The First Step

them with a dealer, and they sold for twenty-five dollars apiece and he wants more. What a pity it takes me so long to paint them. It would be such a pleasant way of making up the deficit! Then I should not have to write to Matthew!

I ought to be recording the joy it is to me to be with dear Mary Lansing. I was never anybody's prop before. Mary has always had two men to do her bidding, and now that she has lost her father, and her husband is across the ocean, she leans on poor, ineffectual, feminine me. Well, at least I am never timid at night. She asks my advice on all the subjects I know nothing about, from the best way of making the baby's garments and the right way of bringing up the boys, to the proper sort of wire screens for the cottage.

I have won over Milly at last. There are moments when I wish I had n't, for she tags my footsteps, persistently demanding a story. I can never remember any, so I make them up out of my own head. She always asks that there be "a fairy and a witch and a dragon in it," and I would far rather go into the kitchen and

The First Step

make a salad, which is a great deal for me to say.

It is perfectly delightful to be of use to some one. Most of Mary's morning is occupied with the baby, so I take the boys in bathing. Don knows how to swim, and I keep one eye on him lest he go out too far, and the other on Paul, whom I am teaching to swim — at least I hope I am.

I receive the callers Mary does not feel in spirits to see, and in the evening, while she is writing a long letter to her husband, I write up this record.

I tell her that, if I had a husband who was abroad, he would be trained to expect only one letter a week from me. Mary tells me that I have no idea how I should feel.

"You'd be the most dependent of all women," she said.

"Indeed, I should not."

And then I go down to watch for a possible letter from Matthew, but it never comes, and so I shall have to write to him. I have made several attempts and torn them up. I long, besides making it a mere business note, to apolo-

The First Step

gize for my rudeness, and to tell him that if he had not been so abrupt, I should have been more polite, but I can't do it. It is impossible to write to Matthew.

Finally I made Mary write for me. I told her there was no use in living in the house with "A Complete Letter Writer, Unabridged," if she would not help me at a pinch, and she has composed a model business letter, "Miss Moor has asked me to write," etc. She has n't seen Matthew since we were all his pupils, and remembers him as a quiet, reserved young man with a dry wit.

Now I am waiting with great eagerness for a reply.

At last I have something eventful to record. This morning Mrs. Eldredge, one of Mary's favorite cousins, came to spend the day. She chose Monday, and as the second girl was busy washing I took Milly in charge as well as the boys. It is not the object of this extract to record the morning. Suffice it to say, all three children had a glorious time, so it was not spent in vain.

The First Step

When we came in at lunch-time I found Mrs. Eldredge had been staying in Wilchester with the Kimballs, next door to my own dear house. I was so homesick at the bare mention of my house that I felt as if I must desert Mary and take the next train, but there are nearly three more weeks before her husband gets back, and a promise is a promise. I asked Mrs. Eldredge if she had seen Betty. I even inquired eagerly about the cat.

"I wonder if your first name is Isabel?" Mrs. Eldredge asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"There was quite a little talk about your house; it is very charming. I used to go over with Mrs. Kimball when she picked the flowers in the garden; she said you had left word that she might. Perhaps you know some of the people who were in the smash-up?"

"The smash-up?"

"Yes, there was a carriage accident just in front of our gate. An old lady, Mrs. Ripley was the name, I think, was very badly injured and her son and daughter and grand-daughter —"

I took it for granted, with that curious trick

The First Step

of the mind by which one forestalls bad news, that Matthew had been seriously hurt. The misery I felt in that single instant was acute.

"Her son, — you said her son was badly hurt —"

"No, she was badly hurt. They are not sure whether she will pull through at her age. He got off with a lame shoulder and a few scratches. He seemed quite broken up by the accident, and kept apologizing for his driving, and offering to help, but doing nothing. The married daughter took command. She was the only one who had a head."

And so she rambled on, while I plied her with eager questions. Sifted down it amounted to this. They were just coming home from a drive when an automobile, which was going at a terrific pace, whizzed around the corner and collided with their carriage. The wheels were smashed and the carriage overturned, and Mrs. Blake fell on top of her mother. Mrs. Ripley was carried into the house by two men who had rushed to the scene of disaster.

"Did n't her son help carry her?"

"There was no need of that. He seemed to

The First Step

be in excruciating pain from his lame shoulder. And he was quite broken up at being the cause of the accident."

She went on to tell how Maria, pale and evidently suffering, telephoned for the doctor and for her brother.

"But you said her brother was driving."

"I mean she telephoned for her other brother, the tall, sensible man who wears spectacles."

"He is the only brother she has."

A description of the first brother coincided perfectly with Mr. Whiting's appearance. Oddly enough, I did n't mind whether his shoulder was lame or not.

The accident had occurred just as Mrs. Eldredge was leaving the house two days before, so she had no further news to give, beyond the fact that Mrs. Blake suggested to her tall brother that their mother should be carried in next door to Isabel's house.

"It is out of the question," he had said, almost rudely.

"But I am sure Isabel would want us to make use of her house," pleaded Maria.

"We have no right to take liberties with her

The First Step

house," he said with great decision. Then the doctor had arrived and he said that Mrs. Ripley must be kept where she was for the present.

Oh, dear! oh, dear! Why cannot I recall that heartless business note, written in Mary's hand? It must have come just as Matthew was watching through the night by his mother, in the agony of fearing that she would not be spared to him. Don't I know how to sympathize with him! Don't I know!

What is life? A field where we play games like little children, foolish, childish games! And we are so eager over them. Then the game is stopped, and we, sobered and shocked, are in the presence of death.

To-day the sky is blue and a song sparrow is singing as cheerfully as if nothing could touch its nest or its young ones, and I am sitting here while my beautiful empty house is standing idle. What are houses? Empty shells unless they shelter the people we love! . . . I have written a letter to Matthew in my own hand, and I have expressed my sympathy and begged him to make any use of my house that he can.

The First Step

I have told him on no account to take any trouble about my business affairs, and I have also offered to come home if I can be of any help, provided Mary can find some one to come and stay with her until her husband gets back.

Why do we ever wish anything in this world? I have so often thought how much happier Matthew would be, and how much more delightful, could he be detached from his mother; could she, for instance, find it for her happiness to go abroad with Cornelia for an indefinite period. Yes, I have strongly wished more than once that Mrs. Ripley might be removed from my path. I almost feel as if this calamity were my own work. But I have never wanted her to die, brilliant, vivid, imperious woman that she is, with her vital interest in all the little things in life.

An answer has come to my first letter, as business-like as my own, typewritten, although signed by Matthew himself. It must have been written the very morning before the accident occurred.

The First Step

MY DEAR MISS MOOR (this formal beginning gave me a stab):—

The letter in your behalf written by Mrs. Lansing has been received. Do not concern yourself any further about those bills. I have delayed answering your letter until I could tell you that they have all been paid. As your signature is needed for the transfer of the certificates, and also for the sale of the woodlot, I have, as your agent, settled everything with your architect and the workmen. I inclose the receipted bills. You need be in no hurry to pay me. When you get home will be time enough.

Truly yours,

MATTHEW RIPLEY.

It is only a transfer of the debt from one man to another, but Matthew will never take advantage of my folly in incurring it.

Another letter has come from him, this time in his own hand.

DEAR ISABEL:—

I thank you for your sympathy. My mother is not able to be moved as yet. She has improved,

The First Step

but we are still very anxious about her. In no case shall we need to accept your kind offer, as, should she recover, she can be moved to her own house. You could not do anything if you were here. She has an excellent trained nurse, and Maria and the Kimballs provide all the society she is equal to seeing at present.

Truly yours,

MATTHEW RIPLEY.

The letter has cut me to the heart. I wrote such a friendly note to him, reserved, to be sure, as I was afraid of slopping over, but sympathetic. At least I meant it to be. Maria is sending me a postal-card every day, about her mother's condition.

Matthew has shut me out, that is certain. To be sure, I closed the door on him first, although I always meant that we should be friends. And now I have a horrible fear lest Annie Kimball, straightforward, shy, honest, good, and lovable Annie Kimball, who is so devoted to his mother, should appeal to him as the one woman who could live cheerfully in the same house with her. And I ought to be glad, for Annie is the

The First Step

salt of the earth. If Matthew were my brother, there is no one in whose hands I would sooner trust him. But he is n't, and I am not glad. On the contrary, the bare idea fills me with inexpressible depression. What more natural, though? Matthew, who is not at all the man to fall in love easily, fancied that I would make him happy, and this was largely because of my moral charms, consisting chiefly of my sweet temper and my fondness for his mother. Now he finds they were a myth, my temper at our last meeting was that of a shrew, and I have told him nothing would induce me to live with his mother. And yet his desire to make a home for himself cannot be destroyed so easily as his false picture of me, and if he turns to a girl who really is all I appeared to be, who am I to blame him? I ought not to mind what happens to me, if he is only happy, but I do. And I miss him like the dickens!

XVII

NOVEMBER. At last I am at home again. How little I thought it would be so long before I got back to my own house. Tonsillitis is not pleasant to have, especially when it runs through a whole family before one takes it one's self. Mary could not take care of the children, because of the baby, so I was isolated upstairs, first with Paul and then with Don. Milly and I came down with it at the same time, just as Jim Lansing got back from England. I believe older people always have it harder than children. In vain I begged to be allowed to go home as soon as I could hold my head up, but neither Jim nor Mary would hear of this; they said that as I had been ill in their behalf they would keep me until I was well again. They begged and begged me to go to Boston with them for the winter, saying they would do all in their power to give me a good time. I should hear concerts and go to the opera and to receptions and parties. Perhaps I may do it yet.

The home-coming has seemed rather flat.

The First Step

Maria and Cornelia met me at the station, and Maria came back with me to supper.

"Isabel, what have you been doing to yourself?" she asked, as we sat before the fire afterwards. "You look like a wraith, a ghost."

"I told you I had had tonsillitis."

"I know that, but you've grown so thin, and you look so forlorn."

"I always look forlorn and old and ugly when I'm thin."

"Oh, it's not so bad as that," said Maria. "You'll pick up your good looks again as soon as you are rested."

Matthew has not come to see me yet, and I have been at home three days.

Monday morning. I went to church yesterday, and as I sat alone in my pew I looked across from time to time at Matthew.

Worry about his mother has not improved his looks: yet now that she is out of danger he ought to look happy. Coming out of church I timed my exit so he would have to stop and shake hands. I wanted to get it over.

Something very curious happened. At the

The First Step

touch of his hand I lost all my self-command, and all I could manage to say was, "How do you do," very coldly and stiffly.

I meant to ask him to come to see me about the wood-lot, but I did n't. Instead of that, I have sent a message to him through Maria, for I cannot rest until my debt is paid.

I don't think I can stand a winter in a small New England town, no, not even although I am in my own improved and most comfortable and hygienic house. I did not realize how much my pleasure consisted in the fact that I was working at something all the time with agreeable companions. First I helped the girls about the dance, and then I had the interest of the house alterations. Now I have neither. Maria is busy with her mother, and Cornelia is in the seventh heaven because she is to spend a year or more in Germany studying music. She is to go with Mrs. Kimball and Annie, who is to study art. I do miss Ernest Whiting's cheerful society.

Mr. Whiting is in town again, and last evening he came to see me. I don't quite know what

The First Step

has happened, whether he was angry at my getting Matthew to pay those bills, or whether he has already found some one else to fit into that dream-house of his: or perhaps the fact that I am pale and thin is sufficiently disillusioning to account for all. Whatever is the cause, we had an uncomfortably dull and spiritless half-hour. The glamour had left me and I was only Nick Bottom, the weaver.

Just as we were beginning to warm up a little, Cornelia entered with her uncle Matthew. I looked at the child's round, supple figure, and at her face glowing with health and beauty and I thought I had found the cause of Mr. Whiting's change. How could any lover of our sex help being charmed by so fair a vision? Cornelia pulled some chrysanthemums out of a vase and tucked them through the belt of her brown corduroy dress. The touch of yellow increased the piquancy of her charms. The flowers blended in with her frock and with the warm brown of her eyes and hair.

Mr. Whiting at once became more animated, while Matthew's matter-of-fact, not to say frigid, manner gave me a mental brace. Busi-

The First Step

ness is business, and he and I fell to talking of the transfer of the wood-lot.

"I am thinking seriously of spending the winter in Boston with the Lansings," I said in clear tones, so that they all could hear.

There was dead silence for a moment, then Cornelia said, "If you're not so stuck on your house that you've got to stay in it, you'd better come abroad with the Kimballs and me; four is a much better number than three. You could take us girls to the opera, Mrs. Kimball hates music, and you'd be company for her while we are having our lessons."

"Thank you, perhaps I will. I'm almost sorry I did n't go back to teaching in St. Louis," I added. "They wrote and begged me to come, and offered to raise my salary."

"Why did n't you go?" Matthew inquired. "I should think it would have been an excellent chance for you."

I felt the color rushing into my cheeks, while an acute wave of misery came over me. To have been so short a time ago the central figure in this little stage, although I did not realize it at the time, to have been sought in marriage by

The First Step

these two widely differing men, and now to be cast aside by both of them as carelessly as if I were an old glove! If I did not deserve to be loved, still less do I deserve to be neglected.

"Uncle Matthew, you are very unflattering," said Cornelia, coming to the rescue; "you ought to beg Miss Isabel to stay here. I'm sure you'll need all the cheering up you can get, after I'm gone."

"I never see much of Miss Moor when she is here," said Matthew; "nor have I observed that she has ever felt it her mission to cheer me up."

The others laughed.

Well, that beautiful wood-lot is no longer mine, and I have parted with some shares of that unremunerative railroad stock, and with some excellent mining-stock, and Matthew is paid at last. Every debt is paid. I am a free woman, with a model house on my hands that is very expensive to run, and an income considerably diminished. I believe they would take me back in St. Louis, at Christmas-time, if I asked them to, as their present teacher is merely a substitute.

The First Step

There is nothing so good in this wide world as work, even if it be humdrum, exacting, uninspiring work. If one has plenty of work there is no time for vagrant thoughts.

Maria and Cornelia have gone to New York for a few days to get Cornelia's outfit. I miss them more than I can say. Mr. Whiting is also away, and Matthew never comes near me. He discouraged the idea of my going to see his mother at present, saying the trained nurse is afraid of excitement for her. I have taken a violent dislike to that nurse, whom I met at Maria's one day. She seems one of those insinuating, slippery people who enjoy getting the upper hand in a house.

However, I am well prepared for a happy old age, for I have plumbing that will not freeze and a furnace that warms every crevice of this old house. If it would only warm the cockles of my heart!

I miss Mary and Jim Lansing and the children; perhaps I may go back to them after all. But no, Jim and Mary are all-sufficient to each other. It is hardly fair to Jim to make a third.

The First Step

Perhaps the most sensible thing I can do will be to go abroad with Cornelia and the Kimballs. Annie is quite keen about it. I should have to rent my house to some one, as otherwise I could n't afford to go, and it would be rather hard on Betty, to say nothing of the cat.

If any one thinks a black cat brings luck to a house, I have proof that it is not so. Whatever has come to me in the last six months, and my experiences have been varied, they can hardly be covered by the words "good luck."

Malicious, teasing moon that shines in at my casement window, just as it did when I started this record of my life here, when I felt so young and happy. Foolish youth, foolish happiness, for am I not almost thirty-five?

XVIII

WINTER has come early this year. We have had two November snowstorms, and now after a thaw the weather has turned cold again and everything that can possibly freeze has frozen, — ponds, rivers, meadows, even to the aforesaid cockles of my heart.

Cornelia persists in the idea that I am going abroad with them, and as there is an extra berth in her stateroom I can leave the decision until the last minute.

Yesterday afternoon Maria asked me to go skating on her brother's pond with her and Cornelia and a group of boys and girls who are having a series of winter picnics in Cornelia's behalf. Each one is positively her last appearance.

We were driven up the mountain in various conveyances, and Matthew's shack was opened and the boys built a huge fire on the hearth. We older people were to get the supper ready, but there was time for skating first. I had not skated for many years, and the fact that I could

The First Step

do it at all gave me a feeling of exhilaration. The boys were all very kind in coming to my assistance. Matthew, who arrived late, in company with an equally busy man, merely gave me a grave nod, and then devoted himself to Cornelia and Annie Kimball.

It was not five months since the afternoon when he had taken me to see my property, now his. How full of life and color and charm that day had been!

By and by Annie Kimball skated over to me.

"Is n't it beautiful?" she said. "That great wood of bare branches, with a few brown leaves still on the oak trees, and the green of the hemlocks and pines, and the shining ice and the gleam of the fire through the open door? Miss Isabel," and she gave my arm a little squeeze, "I am sure you are a winter person, like me. There's always a freemasonry between all people who like winter best."

It was beautiful enough, but it was a sad, strange beauty; even the moon when she rose looked cold. When supper was ready the boys and girls came in in their bright sweaters, and everybody joked and laughed, and every one

The First Step

but myself seemed to feel it a gay occasion. Matthew never once spoke to me, but he found plenty to say to every one else.

When it was time to go home, Maria decided that Matthew's carriage should shift its load, and that I should drive back with him. She is not to be lightly disobeyed, and I was just about to get in when something in Matthew's face showed me that he was even more disinclined for the arrangement than I.

He held out his hand, however, to help me in.

"Thank you," I said, "but if you don't mind, Maria, I think it would be better for me to go back as I came, in the carriage with you. As long as I am to spend the night with you that seems the best arrangement."

Maria had begged for my company, as Cornelia was to spend the night with the Kimballs.

Once more we had hot chocolate and cake at Maria's house, just as we had done that other evening, and again Cornelia sang, this time college songs, with the boys and girls singing the choruses.

"How much we miss Mr. Whiting at a time like this," I said to Maria.

The First Step

"So you miss Ernest Whiting?" said Maria.

"Yes. Does n't every one? He certainly gives a spice to any occasion."

After they had all gone, and I was just starting to go upstairs, Maria said, "Let's sit down before the fire and toast our feet. That's one of Matthew's generous fires, and it's a pity to miss the good of that back log. I have been poor all my life," she continued, giving the log an energetic poke, "but I've always had plenty of open fires, thanks to that brother of mine, who is very generous with his woodlot."

"Yes, he is generous," I said. "He even heaped a few coals of fire on my undeserving head."

"Isabel, I've a piece of news for you," said Maria abruptly. "And the truth is I don't know how you'll take it. I've been putting off telling you, and I tried to get Matthew to do it. That was why I planned that he should drive you home, and then you spoiled it all by insisting on coming with me."

"Is it anything about Matthew? Is Matthew engaged?" I asked, hoping she would not notice how queerly my voice sounded.

The First Step

"Bless you, no. To whom could he be engaged? Matthew, poor boy, has never had any time for that sort of thing. Do you think Matthew has the temperament to fall in love?"

I would not lie, and I was preparing to say, "Why not Matthew as well as another?" when I discovered she was not waiting for an answer from me.

"It is, it is — some one who has admired you very much. It is Ernest Whiting."

There was a long pause. A smaller log in front of the back log broke in two. Maria picked up the brands.

So Ernest Whiting was to marry Cornelia! His energetic statement came back to me.

"Cornelia! We should be divorced in a year."

Had I perhaps put the idea into his head?

"I should think it was a very good thing," I said. "Cornelia is certainly lovely enough to turn any man's head."

"Cornelia? Oh, did you think it was Cornelia? Isabel, what will you say to me when I tell you that Ernest Whiting is engaged to me?"

Certainly history has an odd way of repeating

The First Step

itself. The fact that Maria had once before engaged herself to a man I had refused to marry seemed to make the situation very complete.

"Oh, do say something, Isabel," Maria begged. "I am sure you can whistle him back if you want him. What you leave is always good enough for me, but I don't want to take anything that belongs to you."

In a moment more I had my arms about Maria, and we were laughing and crying together.

Maria and Ernest Whiting! At first it appeared an extraordinary combination, but as Maria told her tale it all seemed so simple and natural and inevitable that I wondered I had not foreseen it long ago. We sat there before the blazing fire until long past two o'clock, while Maria gave me Ernest's entire history, from his lonely neglected childhood up to the present day. She did not realize that most of it was a twice-told tale to me; but it was interesting to get it from a different angle.

"You see, Isabel, you and he would never have got on together," Maria said finally, as the clock struck two.

The First Step

"Did I ever say we would?" I could not forbear remarking.

"No, of course you did n't, and you were right. You are too much alike to make a good team. "

"In what way do you think us alike?"

"You both care too much about pleasing, and you spend money too easily. No, you and he are both too easy-going, too light-weight to get on together."

"I, light-weight?" I exclaimed.

"You are, Isabel, compared with me. You are enchanting, but you are a distinctly fluffy person. Could you possibly keep him from fluttering around all the neighbors' gardens, charming butterfly that he is?"

"Can you?"

"Wait and see. From what I've told you, you can see for yourself he has never had half a chance. He does n't want to flutter, he wants to stay put. He needs to be taken care of just as much as you do. I could see how much he liked being fussed over when he had his lame shoulder. He fancied when he first saw you that he had found the very woman to tie him

The First Step

down, but, oh, Isabel, my darling, what would happen if Betty gave warning? What would you do, my poor child, with a succession of the average servants? And if you lived in New York in the winter I should n't always be on hand on your maid's evening out. Ernest fancies he lives in the clouds, but I never knew a more earthy mortal, one fonder of all the comforts and luxuries of life. He may like poetry, but he cares a great deal more about a game of bridge. When I took him to task for his flirtation with Cornelia, and he told me in that manly fashion that he was in love with you; and then when he came and said it was all over, that you would not listen to him and he was sure from what you told him that you were in love with some one else, how could I help sympathizing with him? Do you forgive me?"

So he thought me in love with Matthew, and he had not named Matthew to Maria; that was unexpectedly self-restrained of him.

"I told him you were not easily won," went on Maria, "and I said it would all come right in time, and then, after he had seen you the

The First Step

other night, he said he knew for certain that you cared for some one else."

"That was a rash conclusion to jump to," said I. "Does it prove I care for some one else just because I do not care for him?"

"He seemed to think it did. And, indeed, he's so fascinating I don't see how you could help being bewitched with him if you were heart free. Whatever you do, Isabel, don't marry a St. Louis man. We can't lose you now we've once had you. You had better go abroad for a year or so with Cornelia, and not do anything rashly."

Every one seems determined to send me abroad. Cornelia came in the next morning, full of her own affairs, and bringing with her a Baedeker so that we could make our plans together.

"Were n't you just about stunned when mother told you of her engagement?" she asked.

"I was surprised, but I think it is a very good thing."

Cornelia looked particularly charming and young as she gave her version of the affair.

The First Step

"Mother gets there every time," she said. "There's no use talking, she cares a lot about him. What I don't understand is why he cares for her. It began when we were in New York. He was very kind about taking us sight-seeing and to the theater, and then he got in the habit of going shopping with us and helping choose my frocks. He was quite a help, for he has such a good eye for color. And once when we were at a milliner's he made mother try on a big picture hat with red in it. Mother looked simply stunning, and he told her how she must always wear a touch of red to clear up her complexion. She said she had been in half-mourning so long she could n't think of wearing red, and, anyway, the hat cost thirty dollars, so she would n't get it—trust mother for being economical. It is rather a joke on mother, when she said such a lot about Mr. Whiting being so unreliable and not in earnest, that she should be marrying him herself in the end. He told her some time ago that he cared for you, and then she got into a state of mind for fear I'd think he was in love with me. As if I did n't know he was flirting! I may have been born yesterday compared with

The First Step

you and mother, but I was n't born a fool. That was why mother was so ready to let me go abroad with the Kimballs. She might have known that if I'd cared about him wild horses would n't have dragged me to Europe, but as I don't," she added with humor, "of course I can't help wondering why mother can bear to tie herself down when she might have had the fun of going to Europe with me and the Kimballs." She dismissed the subject cavalierly as less interesting than her own concerns. "Dear Miss Isabel," she said, "if you'll only come abroad, too, I'll promise to give you the time of your life."

XIX

It is the twenty-first of November, my birthday, and I have had letters and small gifts from distant friends. I feel a little solitary because no one here will remember the day, which is inconsistent of me, as I want to forget it myself. I do not at all like being thirty-five years old.

Maria and Ernest Whiting are to be married soon after Cornelia and the Kimballs sail. Maria is taking it for granted that I am going abroad with them, and yesterday she asked me if I would rent my house to her and Ernest for a year.

I can't help sympathizing with the man whose ranch with its accompaniments was completely destroyed by fire, and who sat on the rail fence and laughed because it was so "darned complete."

"Ernest does not altogether like my house," said Maria. "We should have to alter it a good deal before it would suit him, and so it seems providential all around that you are going away for a time, for you will need the money, and we want the house."

The First Step

If I am sometimes mistaken in character, as the events of the last six months have proved, I at least have at moments a foreseeing mind, and on this occasion it looked far ahead into the future.

If I went abroad my stay would stretch to two years, and on coming back Maria and her husband would be so firmly settled in my house that I should never have the heart to dislodge them. Meanwhile Cornelia and I would have become so attached to each other that it would end in our living together in Maria's house.

"Of course it would be very nice to have the money, and I know you would take good care of the house, but I am not sure that I am going abroad," I said.

In the afternoon, just as I was starting to go to the post-office, Betty stopped me.

At first I thought it was merely on account of her general anxiety for my appearance.

"Are n't you going to leave off black pretty soon?" she asked. "That coat is getting shiny in the back."

"I can't afford new clothes," I said. "You

The First Step

should be thankful that the kitchen ceiling is decorated with iron-sized brass pipes."

"You must have bought your furs before you altered the house," and she looked approvingly at my fluffy black muff and boa.

"I did."

And then, without further preamble, she gave me the astonishing news that she could have a place in the household of the lady with whom her cousin was living.

The defection of Betty was the last straw. I found I had been bolstering myself up with the thought that it would not be fair to Betty to go abroad and turn her adrift just as winter was coming on. The contrast of my high hopes and absolutely irrational happiness when first I came into this dear old house and the way I was deserted by all my friends now, presented itself forcibly to my mind. There was no use in trying to disguise the truth from myself any longer. I did not want to go to Boston or to St. Louis or to Europe. I turned my head away so Betty should not see the tears in my eyes, and as soon as I could command my voice I said, "I thought you were satisfied with your place, Betty."

The First Step

"The place is good enough," said Betty, "but I can't live on in the place when Mrs. Blake and Mr. Whiting take the house."

"I am not going to rent the house to them or to any one else," I said. "I am going to live here myself; but of course, if you are anxious to leave me I have no right to try to keep you."

"You were very good last summer, paying my wages all the time you were away," Betty admitted grudgingly. "It is n't many would do that."

"That was nothing. Of course they would. It would n't have been fair not to pay your wages just because I was prevented from coming home."

I could see that Betty on her side was looking about for a pretext for staying on. Surely this old house has cast its spell over us all!

"They don't like cats, where my cousin is," she observed. "I was wondering what I would do about the cat."

"Oh, Betty, you dear," I said, and I put my arms around her, "you have made this a home to me. I have n't had a home since my mother died."

The First Step

Betty detached herself from my embrace. If she stayed it was to be for purely unsentimental reasons.

"I could n't bear to think of Mr. Whiting and Mrs. Blake getting the benefit of all those apples and pears," she owned.

"By the way, you never told me how you got them picked."

"He said not to tell you, but I'm going to. Mr. Ripley came around and scared off the boys, moonlight nights, and then he sent his man to pick them. He would n't let me pay anything; he said he was doing it just because he was a neighbor. He said not to tell you, for he did n't want you to feel under an obligation, and it was n't one really, for he was paying his man anyway and had n't enough work on his own place to keep him busy."

"How good of Matthew," I thought. I did not know it was possible to experience such a revulsion of feeling in five minutes. The certainty that I was not going to tear myself up by the roots and leave the home that had become so dear to me sent me along the village highway with winged feet. On my way back

The First Step

from the post-office Mrs. Ripley's maid overtook me and handed me a note.

I asked her how her mistress was.

"She gains a little every day. She is very anxious to see you, Miss Moor."

I was touched by Mrs. Ripley's note. It was a pathetic little scrawl very shakily written with her left hand. She thanked me for the flowers I had sent her and begged me to come to see her at once, for her nurse was to be out for the whole afternoon.

There was a postscript which said, "Don't be kept away by your conscience, because you think my nurse would not approve. It is all right. Maria suggested your coming. She was to have spent the afternoon with me, but has been carried off by Ernest."

I was not prepared for the amount of emotion that Mrs. Ripley and I were to feel in seeing each other. The sight of that once masterful and dominant little figure, lying in bed propped up with pillows, brought the tears to my eyes. A wave of tenderness for Matthew's mother made it impossible for me to speak at once.

She put out her two shrunken arms and drew

The First Step

me down to her. Her thin hands were clasped around my neck and she pressed me close to her heart.

"Oh, Isabel, my darling! My darling! How I have missed you. How I have longed for you," she said over and over again. "Maria has been devotion itself," she added, "but she has been absorbed in getting Cornelia ready for Europe, and now Ernest is putting in his claim. They tell me you are going abroad," she added drearily. "There will be no one left but Matthew, for even my dragon of a trained nurse is going in a fortnight. Matthew is a comfort, but he is only a man, and he has been very much taken up with work since they have made him Judge of the Probate Court. It is an honor I have long craved for him, but it takes him away from home a great deal. Oh, my dear, how I wish you were going to stay among us always. You are such an inexpressible comfort."

"I am going to stay," I said, stroking the thin hand.

"You are not going away?" There was a ring of happy incredulity in her voice. "But Maria

The First Step

told us last night that she and Ernest were to rent your house."

"No, I am going to live in my own house. I did n't promise it to them."

"Matthew said all along that he was sure you would n't go away."

"Matthew?" My cheeks were flaming. "How could he know what I was going to do? I did n't decide myself until half an hour ago."

"I don't know why he felt so sure, but last night even he gave in. The poor boy was very depressed after my accident: I have never known him in such low spirits; but now I am improving, he is like a different man. And then Maria's engagement filled him with great delight. I own I was surprised, for he never seemed to fancy Ernest Whiting. He did n't speak of him at all — that's his way if he does n't like a person; but as soon as he found he was in earnest all this time his opinion of him went up. That was an unintentional pun; Ernest seems an inappropriate name for the dear fellow; Thistledown would suit him better."

"Maria seems very happy," I ventured.

The First Step

"Yes. It is good for Maria to belong to some one who insists on her being frivolous. I wish Matthew was frivolous enough to be engaged."

I got up to straighten the curtain and my back was turned to her.

"Maria says he has n't the temperament to fall in love," I said.

That peaceful afternoon with Mrs. Ripley will always stand out as one of the happiest times I have ever known.

I made her stop talking, for her agitation at seeing me had given me a higher opinion of the judgment of her trained nurse than I had had before. I kept up the open fire and sat where she could see me (she insisted on that), and when I saw her eyes fixed on me every now and then, as I turned over the leaves of a book, with the hungry, loving glance I used to notice when I took care of my mother, I felt a sense of calm content. Her eyes were like Matthew's, and the way in which they were bent on me, as if they wanted to keep me for all time, recalled the evening that I can never forget. As I looked at her I thought how strange are the ways of

The First Step

Providence! Only a short time ago I had felt that nothing would induce me to live in the house with Matthew's mother, and now I was thanking Heaven for giving me this birthday present of her love. Thirty-five did not seem any age at all in comparison with the years she had attained, and each birthday would be but a cause for added thankfulness if only I could be near those I loved best.

When it was time for me to go home she drew me to her and kissed me.

"Dear Isabel, you'll come again to-morrow?" she entreated wistfully.

"To-morrow and other to-morrows. Any time you want to see me."

"That would be every day and all day long," she said.

She caught hold of the end of my boa and drew me back to her.

"You look so lovely and so young in that drooping black hat and those furs. I don't see what Ernest Whiting was thinking of. If I were a young man you would n't escape me."

"I have n't escaped you as it is," I said.

XX

WHEN I left the house I found that it was as dark as if it were night. There was no moon, and the sky was overcast, but I felt as if all the stars in the universe were shining, and the moon were at its full. Life had become a glorious progress, not half long enough, even if it lasted for fourscore years.

When I reached my own gate I stood for a moment looking at the warmth and cheer inside my house, for Betty had lighted the parlor fire. Suddenly I felt hot and cold all over and my heart stood still, for there at my desk with the lighted lamp by his side sat Matthew, pen in hand, bending over a sheet of paper in his near-sighted way. At that moment I had a foreshadowing knowledge of what home meant.

I still had the instinct to save myself, to fly before it was too late. It was so strong that it was almost awful, this pain and sweetness of love. I stood watching him, undecided whether to turn in at the gate, or pass on down the street.

The First Step

Presently Matthew looked up, as if he were listening for the sound of my hand on the knob of the front door.

I noticed with sharp compunction some threads of silver in the brown hair at his temple. I had never seen him look so sad. After a time he got up to leave the room, and a moment later he came out of the front door. Still undecided, I waited in the shadow behind the horse-chestnut tree, where I was sure he could not see me. He went slowly down the steps, pausing for half a minute on the lower one, as if he, too, were thinking, as I was, of all the steps that had followed the first.

Some uncanny instinct seems given to the near-sighted who often reach in more subtle ways what we clumsier mortals perceive by sight.

"Isabel," he said, "is that you?"

"Yes."

"I've been waiting to see you for the last hour. I've left a note for you."

His voice was so perfectly matter-of-fact that I felt chilled.

"Do come back," I begged.

The First Step

As we passed in at the front door, I thought how many times it had opened to love and happiness when Cousin Harriet was young.

I noticed for the first time, as I went into the parlor, that there was a large pot of white azaleas on the piano. The plant was covered with blossoms and buds, which nestled among its green leaves, making me think of a miniature snowstorm.

"It is my birthday," I explained. "Some one must have sent me that azalea for a present."

"Yes," said Matthew, "it is a birthday present from me. I heard Maria say you wanted to paint some white azaleas."

I had had half a dozen sprays in mind, and the lavishness of his gift seemed symbolical of our whole relationship, for when he gave it was in full measure, and I was stirred to the depths of my own heart as I began faintly to realize what it meant to have won his. We were standing by the piano and I softly fingered the delicate white blossoms.

"Who told you it was my birthday?" I asked.

"It used to be on the twenty-first of Novem-

The First Step

ber when you were a school-girl. I did n't see any reason for you to have changed it."

It seemed wonderful to me that he should have remembered the date of my birthday all these years.

"It was good of you to come to see me on my birthday," I said, "but I'm sorry you have been wasting all this time here, for I have been spending the afternoon with your mother."

"With my mother? That was good of you."

"She sent for me. I was so glad to see her."

His face lighted up at these words, but suddenly clouded.

"I suppose you told her your plans for your trip abroad. It was only yesterday that I heard you were really going."

"Your mother said you would not believe it at first. Why would n't you believe it?" I asked impulsively.

He looked down at me with those eyes so like his mother's and I was frightened by their compelling power. I began to tremble and once again I had that mad impulse to escape.

"You know why," he said in an unsteady voice. "Isabel, I can't bear to let you go."

The First Step

I took refuge behind the pot of azaleas.

"You seem made to be loved and taken care of," he went on brokenly. "And when — when I found you did n't care for — some one else, I was sure it meant I could make you care for me. I was wrong in expecting you to live with my mother, it was unreasonable; and yet had you cared for me as I care for you —"

"Had I cared," I said in a trembling voice, "it would have been my pride, my joy to help you with whatever burdens you had to bear; had I cared, I should have loved your mother, not only for her own sake, but still more for yours."

"Yes, and instead of that you are going away!"

I no longer had a desire to escape, but an imperative impulse to end his misery at once. I came out from behind the pot of azaleas.

He took a step backward at my approach.

"If you go away, don't come back again," he said vehemently. "Life was all right before you came."

These characteristic words dispelled the last trace of my fear and put me into irrepressibly good spirits.

The First Step

"I am sorry that it spoils your life to have me about," I said. "It is a great pity, for I'm going to stay here always."

"Isabel!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, I am."

"Why are you going to stay?" he demanded breathlessly.

"You know why," I said repeating his words.

THE END

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS
U . S . A

1

2

3

4

5



